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MASKED RIDER WESTERN

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TAINTED GOLD
An Action Novelet
By REEVE WALKER

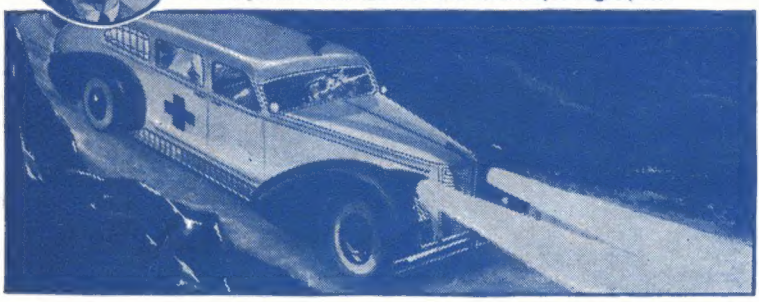
ARIZONA GUNSMOKE
A Complete Book-Length Novel of the Wild West's Most Famous Riders of the Owl-Hoot Trail
By TOM CURRY

RIDE TO NOWHERE
By ALLAN R. BOSWORTH

A THRILLING PUBLICATION

"WE RACED DEATH DOWN A MOUNTAIN SIDE!"

A true experience of male nurse GROVER C. BIRCHFIELD, Los Angeles, Calif.



"WE WERE RUSHING A CARDIAC CASE by ambulance to the hospital one dark night," writes Mr. Birchfield. "We were two thousand feet up on a winding mountain road and six miles from our goal, when all lights blew out.

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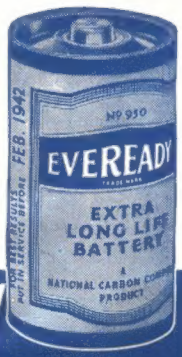
(Signed) Grover C. Birchfield"



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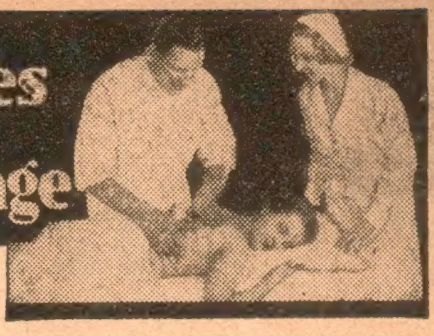

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Vol. 11, No. 2 SEPTEMBER, 1941 Price, 10c

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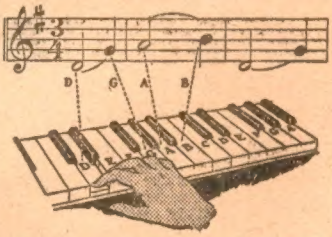

Strike the notes above and you'll be playing the melody of this famous waltz. Easy? Read what Mrs. *P. L. D., of California, says: "I am taking your cue for mother and child to learn together. I can hardly believe I can play the Merry Widow Waltz in two weeks."

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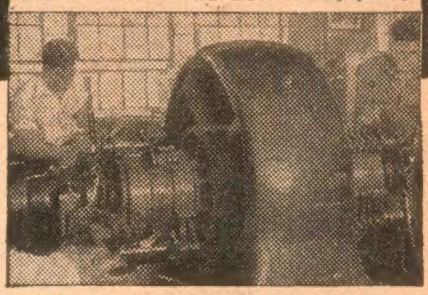

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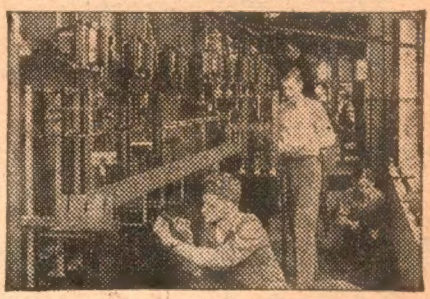

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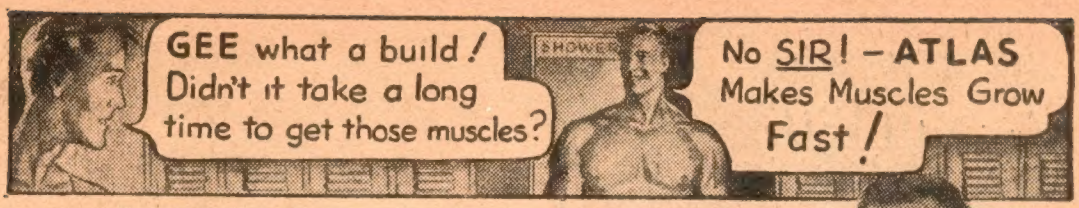
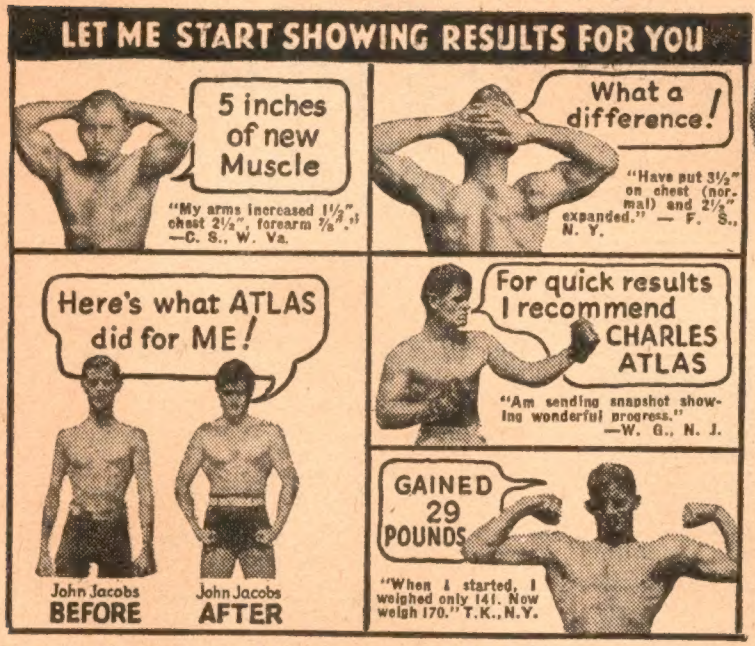


Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a New Man?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GAINED 29 POUNDS
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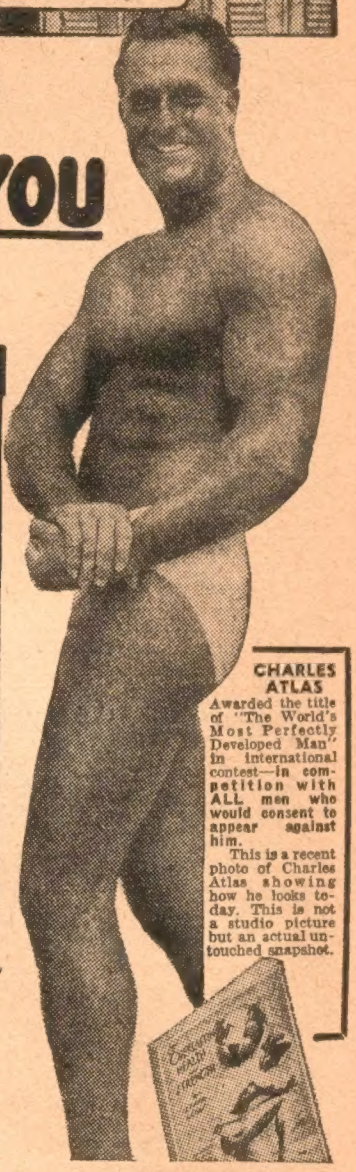

CHARLES ATLAS
Awarded the title of "The World's Most Perfectly Developed Man" in international contest—in competition with ALL men who would consent to appear against him.

This is a recent photo of Charles Atlas showing how he looks today. This is not a studio picture but an actual untouched snapshot.

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I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system INSIDE and OUTSIDE! I can add inches to your chest, give you a vise-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new, beautiful suit of muscle!

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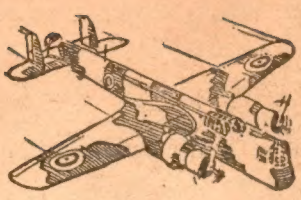

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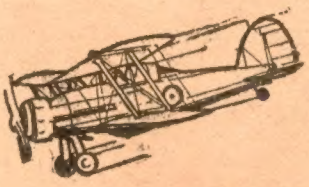

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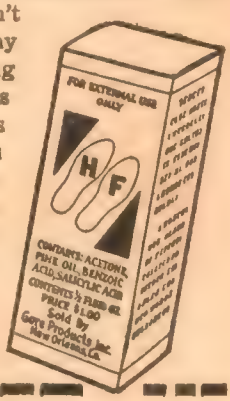

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CHAPTER I

Hills of Death

THE shadows were ink-black as the Arizona moon climbed into a clear night sky. A west wind rustled the pods of mesquite and bushes while the broad creek in the lovely valley through which wound the dirt highway, reflected the beautiful silver light.

"Careful now, boys. Cromo, grab his reins but don't slice him unless he fights. Buff'll knock him out from behind. Masks up so he won't recognize us."

The speaker was tall, and he wore black clothing. The white V of a ruffled shirt showed below the oval patch of his face, and his eyes glowed with a feral glint as he gave his orders.

The bronzed body of the man called Cromo, an Apache, was naked from

the belt up. He wore fringed buckskin pants, and his black hair was boundy by a dirty band. He looked like some murderous animal as he crouched close to the edge of the road. With him waited a bulky man with immense arms and barrel-like flanks.

The steady *clop-clop* of a horse's hoofs told them their victim was nearing.

"Don't miss, now," the leader warned.

"We'll get him, Blackie," the big fellow promised hoarsely.

The silhouette of the rider loomed against the moon sky. Cromo and the giant, "Buff" Burton, were poised for the attack, and their quarry rode right into the trap, totally unaware of his peril until his mustang snorted and shied.

But Cromo had already sprung from a clump of brush in a terrific lunge. One sinewy hand snatched the reins, jerking them from the startled rider's grip. He had been slumped over his saddle-horn, half asleep, and before he came fully awake Buff Burton, from behind, jerked him from his saddle.

"What the devil—" he began, but that was all he did say, and he saw nothing, before he went limp as Burton hit him on the head with a short club. Buff growled. "There he is, Blackie, out cold."

"Blackie" joined his two lieutenants, bending over the unconscious victim. Blackie's slap sent the mustang running off. Then as all three pulled down their masks, Blackie swore suddenly.

"What's that?" he demanded.

THE hoofbeats of the galloping mustang had prevented them, until then, from hearing another rider who was coming toward them at a fast clip. He was around the curve and on them before they could get out of sight. Slow-moving Buff Burton was still crouched over the quiet figure, but Cromo, snarling, had yanked out his long, gleaming knife.

A cowboy, in wide Stetson and leather chaps, brought his big cayuse to a sliding stop as he chanced upon the three at their robbery.

"Hey, what's all this?" he bawled. The moonlight caught the sheen of his six-shooter as he whipped it from its sheath. "Robbers, huh?" His sharp eyes peered hard at them. "Why, say, you're that strong man from the medicine show in town! And that's the Apache with yuh, ain't it? And—"

Cromo tensed for the spring, knife back, but the cowboy was some distance off and his bullet would fly faster than a blade. But at that instant another Colt blared yellow-red death from the flank. The horseman threw up his arms, his pistol exploding harmlessly. His mustang bucked, throwing him, and the waddy fell with his hand doubled under him in the long grass. His horse plunged down the road.

Blackie Salem jumped out, in his long hand the smoking revolver with which he had dispatched the unfortunate cowboy.

"Pronto now!" snapped Salem. "Cromo, you run up the road and give us a call if any more snoopers come along. Buff, tote that bozo we knocked out back into the bush where we can search him without bein' annoyed."

Coolly Blackie ignored the murdered cowboy. Killing meant nothing to him. The dead man was left where he had fallen as Buff Burton raised the small, limp fellow they had first attacked. Pushing through the dense chaparral, down toward the creek, they searched their victim. Soon Blackie swore with satisfaction.

"Got 'em," he chortled. "He had 'em, just like I figgered he did."

He dropped something in his pocket, as a night bird gave a shrill cry from up the road.

"That's Cromo," said Buff. "Somebody comin'."

"The blasted trail's as busy as Main street on Saturday night," growled Blackie. He drew his gun again. "C'mon. We'll sneak back and see who it is."

They lay in wait by the road. The road. "Look out, Midnight!" the rider in black called sharply.

The great horse whirled to a stop, and the man in the black mask moved like a flash. A gun was in his hand as he hit the ground. He touched the dead man, but did not pause. His lips made a single clicking sound, then he was back in the leather without touching stirrup iron, and the black stallion called Midnight was

WAYNE MORGAN

thud of heavy hoofs increased and a big man in a black cloak, and with a large black sombrero strapped on his head, flashed around the bend. He was riding a powerful and speedy black stallion. Then they saw the black domino mask across the upper part of the man's face, the eyes gleaming through the slits. Buff Burton pulled a big Colt from inside his shirt and slowly raised it, but Salem put a hand on the giant's wrist at the moment the black mount's forehoofs nearly crunched on the corpse in the flying on around the next bend out of sight.

"Yuh shoulda let me down, Blackie," grumbled Buff.

"Humph!" whispered Salem. "I guess you didn't know who he is. He's the Masked Rider! I've heard plenty about that bandit, and I had good reason not to gun him. Don't you see, Buff? He's on the owlhoot trail and this whole business we're in on can be blamed on him! C'mon—let's not waste time. Let's get back to the show."

They hurried down to the creek and crossed on some big stones, not wetting their boots above the shin. A low crackle of chaparral alarmed them for a moment, but then Cromo hissed his signal.

"Senor—pronto!" called the Apache killer in a whisper. "He doubles back, and someone else comes."

Hastily reaching their horses which waited across the stream, they took to the saddle and spurred off full-tilt on a narrow deer trail.

"What happened, Cromo?" demanded Salem, as they rode up a rocky slope into the woods.

"Rider in mask creep back," said the Apache. "He ees at creek now, try to trail us. I go slower, hide trail. Hurry."

Blackie and Buff flogged their fast horses through the narrow ridge passes, while Cromo flitted to the rear, covering trail with the skill of his race.

By the time the Masked Rider had smelled them out they would be out of his reach.

The weird cry of a big animal sounded dimly off across the creek.

"What was that?" Salem asked Buff.

"Cougar, mountain lion, Boss."

But the howl was not that of a real mountain lion, perfect as it sounded. It was made by the Masked Rider who was giving his signal, calling to his loyal friend and follower, Blue Hawk, the Yaqui Indian who traveled with him across the vast reaches of the Western world.

When he had come upon the dead man in the road, the Masked Rider had hurried on, for he guessed the assassins must be close at hand since the body was not yet cold. As soon as he was out of close range, however, he had dismounted and turned back, to creep through the dark bush in an attempt to get in behind the killers. Faint sounds of their quick retreat across the purling creek told him the way they were going, but they were on their way before he could get near.

The reply to the Masked Rider's call came from the road, and he hastened back to meet Blue Hawk who loomed in the distance, riding a gray ghost of a horse and leading two others, a hammerheaded roan and a pinto, their regular string.

In the moonlight the Masked Rider showed tall, lithe, and powerful. Known by that name from the Rio Grande to Montana, he also was known as the Robin Hood outlaw, because always he was ready to come to the aid of the oppressed, to fight in the cause of right and justice. Never was he feared by decent folk, but the hard-eyed killers against whom he turned his swift and accurate guns cursed his name and hated him. For his courage was so grim and indomitable, the speed of his Colt so great, that no odds were too great for him to fight against. Many and varied were the stories circulated through the rangelands concerning the Masked Rider, most of them in praise of his prowess in defense of the weak, no matter if men called him outlaw.

THOUGH still young, his past was a closed book, mysterious. Not even Blue Hawk knew his real name. To Blue Hawk he was always "Senor" though there were many times that he rode in the guise of "Wayne Morgan", a wandering waddy. In that rôle the Masked Rider could circulate among people without being recognized as the famous outlaw.

From his speech, at times, it might be guessed that he was well educated, although he loved the cow country lingo and made free use of it. Such was the man who rode the handsome black stallion, Midnight. Both horse and rider had become legend.

Had he ever committed a crime, that the Law wanted him? Blue Hawk had never seen him do anything dishonest, cruel or criminal. Tough as he was

BLUE HAWK

in a scrap, the Masked Rider had only deep sympathy for right-thinking, right-living people who might be in trouble.

Fate, however, had not always dealt him kindness in return for kindness, for many times he had been accused of deeds he had never done, sworn to by bandits who sought to save themselves from retribution. Gossip and rumor helped spread such yarns. So with all hope of vindicating himself gone, the Masked Rider rode the danger trails, his championship of the underdog sending him into flaming battles.

Along his back trail were many scores who remembered him with deep gratitude, for the great help he had given them, freely, at the risk of his own life.

Blue Hawk, the Yaqui, dismounted from his gray, as he rode up.

"What is wrong, Senor?" the Indian calmly inquired.

Blue Hawk spoke without accent, for he had learned English at a mission school. But he was the characteristic Yaqui in his white shirt and white cotton drill pants, with a wide, bright-colored sash at his lean waist, where his knife gleamed. A red band kept his long black hair out of his dark eyes, and on his feet were doeskin moccasins. He was expert at taking care of himself in a fight or under any conditions. To the Masked Rider, he gave a blind devotion. He would die for his friend, cheerfully, without hesitation.

"I dunno what's wrong, Blue Hawk," the Masked Rider told him gruffly. "But I mean to find out. Look at this cowboy that somebody's killed. He was a right decent young feller, judgin' by his face. Ain't been robbed, either. Let's see if we can trail the killers. There may be somethin' here we ought to savvy."

"*Bueno.*"

"Hide the hosses and we'll try to pick up sign. But I reckon we'll hafta

wait till dawn. The killers went across the creek, and rode off through the Purple Ridges."

The clever Yaqui, who had the trailing ability of a panther, and the Masked Rider, who could follow sign with the best of them, shortcut down to the creek, where the Masked Rider had heard the killers crossing. But it was difficult and slow, hunting marks in the chaparral and rocks at night.

"Let's go back and rest up," the Masked Rider at last suggested. "It'll be light 'fore long. Then we can do better, Blue Hawk."

CHAPTER II

Medicine Show

DAWN came early, grayness breaking the sky, while white mists rolled up from Araviapa Creek, which watered the Purple Ridges country. The Masked Rider and Blue Hawk began casting about, then, the Yaqui going into the chaparral on all fours, like a bloodhound.

As the light grew, and the Masked Rider examined the faint tracks down by the creek, suddenly a tiny, glinting thing in softer dirt and grass took his eye. He picked it up, looking at it curiously. It was a small, sharp stone, and one side was brilliant enough to reflect the light. Hearing Blue Hawk's call, the Masked Rider dropped it into his pocket and hurried to his partner.

Blue Hawk was kneeling by the side of an unconscious, slender little man whose head was bloody.

"He is not dead, Senor!" reported Blue Hawk. "But knocked out."

"Them robbers, of course, done that," muttered the Masked Rider. "Three of 'em, wasn't there?"

"*Si.* A big man, very heavy, a tall one in a black suit, and an Apache."

"Apache! How yuh savvy that?"

Blue Hawk shrugged. "Smell him," he grunted.

The Masked Rider nodded. "Yuh're generally right," he said, for he knew Blue Hawk's perceptions were as keen as those of a hunting animal. The Masked Rider had come to trust him implicitly.

A search of the pockets of the limp victim disclosed a little cash, smoking materials, odds-and-ends. But only a letter he found interested the Masked Rider. It had recently been postmarked in Chicago, Illinois, and was addressed to "William Smith, General Delivery, Pinetown, Arizona." It read, in part:

Dear Boy:

Keep moving. Don't stay too long in one place. Somers Bros. have offered $10,000 reward and the blood-money hunters are trying to trace you. It was a wonderful job! Everybody's talking of how slick you pulled it. I'll hope to join you in Tucson or Phoenix next month but you better not write me again on account of the police. Word will always reach me through Mabel.

The letter was signed "Marie."

"Huh!" grunted the Masked Rider. "This feller's a thief, I reckon, Blue Hawk. He ain't so bad off, either. We'll set him by the road and somebody'll pick him up soon. As for the dead one, seems like he was a decent young feller. I'm goin' to trail them killers through and find out what all this is about."

Getting their horses, after a quick breakfast, they plunged into the chaparral across the creek and slowly followed on the trail.

"Apache hide sign—very good," Blue Hawk reported after a time.

Remembering that Apache, the Masked Rider had been turning it all over in his mind.

"They're headin' for Saddleville, Blue Hawk," he abruptly concluded. "Three—a big one, a man in black, an Apache! Remember that medicine show we saw the other day in Pinetown?"

"*Si.* That is it, Senor!"
"Let's ride, then. . . ."

THE setting sun bathed the heavily bushed mountain slopes and the ruby-red of the great fireball blended with the dusty-greens and browns of the undergrowth to a mauve hue which made the wild Arizona hills appear to be purple. This natural phenomenon was a pride and joy to the inhabitants of the Purple Ridges, a subsidiary range of the Galiuras which thrust their burnt-umber, rugged summits to the brassy sky.

It was hot and it was dry but those hardy souls who had settled in Arizona were used to it. Aravaipa Creek, a tributary of the San Pedro River, furnished water for them and their stock, running in the little vales of the Purple Ridges and over cactus-studded flats. Mesquite on the hills, however, was a nuisance since it crowded out grass on which steers could feed. Much of the thorned growth was flowering. Wands of graceful ocotillo oscillated in the soft breeze, while the yellow creosote blossoms contributed tangy odor.

The town of Saddleville, nestling along the Aravaipa was small, with adobe brick or frame dwellings. It had the usual plaza, around which the settlement clustered. It looked much like other such southwestern towns in the valley, where saloonkeeping seemed to be the principal industry. One would be a Mexican place where *tequila* was sold. Another would be large, also serving as the town's meeting-place. Besides its own quota of saloons, Saddleville also had a general store, a post-office annex and telegraph office, a single-cell lockup, and hovels as well as some rather attractive homes.

But Saddleville was different this evening from the other valley towns. There was a stir in the plaza, where usually there was only a yellow hound or so, or a sow rooting for her pig litter in the dirt. Now the plaza was occupied by a traveling medicine show. A large canvas tent was in the center, there were smaller tents, and the wagons that transported the show from town to town. A painted sign proclaimed:

DR. BLACKIE SALEM'S GREATEST SHOW!

Smaller signs, attached to tent walls or nailed to the gay-painted wagons, were advertisements glowingly descriptive of

"SALEM'S MAGIC ELIXIR,"

the sale of which was the chief support of the show.

From the main tent came the low throbbing of an Indian war-drum. The afternoon performance had reached its climax, and a strident voice was urging the audience not to miss the chance of a life time.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, many years ago a great Indian medicine man compounded an elixir of magic and astounding powers. This secret, now possessed by me alone, was bequeathed me by my grandfather who saved the life of that Indian, and is now in this bottle. Think of it! For only fifty cents you can feel young again and all your cares and illnesses will pass away. I am not here for your money, my good friends. It is to help *you*. It costs me more to manufacture than. . . ."

In the big tent the audience listened, some grinning, others serious, hoping what the barker said might be true.

A WADDY in blue flannel shirt over broad shoulders, flapping vest with a tobacco-sac tab hanging from the breast pocket, a gray Stetson straight over keen blue eyes and good-looking, smooth bronzed face, lean hips and long legs encased in levis tucked into run-over boots, stood there listening, watching the tall

Blackie Salem. Gun-belts banded his slim waist.

The Masked Rider, having trailed Salem to Saddleville, had changed to his Wayne Morgan garb, and come into the town to observe the showman and his retinue.

"A smooth lookin' rascal, shore enough," he thought. "What's his game?"

Blackie Salem did not fool Wayne Morgan. He knew, as a rule, that these traveling medicine shows sold harmless colored water in their bottles, reaping an enormous profit from the gullible, half sick people. Salem, however, he knew to be a highway robber as well as a slick confidence man.

BLACKIE was six feet tall, but slender. He wore tight-fitting black trousers, and a frock coat, with a slightly soiled ruffled white shirt. His hands were long, slim, and as quick as his deep-set, ink-black eyes, and his mouth was thin-lipped. He wore a waxed black mustache clipped to a thin line, and a spot goatee.

Glib and adept at his spiel, Blackie Salem stampeded the crowd into buying, forcing bottles into undecided hands. His long, narrow nose twitched and his eyes shone as he worked.

Beads of sweat stood out on his olive-skinned brow and cheeks.

At Blackie's right posed a tremendous creature attired in a moth-eaten leopard's skin—a giant, weighing over three hundred pounds. His misshapen pate had been shaved to accentuate his natural ferocity, and his neck was as wide as his head. The jaw was undershot, nose mashed, underlip protruding. Small pale-blue eyes blinked stupidly at the audience, and at his sandaled feet were some of the heavy weights he had been lifting, for Buff Burton was the show's strong man, one of its leading attractions.

At the back of the platform lurked a lithe, brown-skinned Apache, in full war paint and feathers. The skin was tight over his high cheek-bones, he had an eagle beak and steady, lustreless black eyes. Now and then he touched the war-drum with his bony knuckles.

But it was not on Blackie Salem, Buff Burton, or Cromo, the Apache "chief," that eyes kept turning.

At Salem's left posed a girl, fresh and lovely—the feminine appeal of the show, and a powerful attraction, for she sold more bottles of elixir than did all the men.

Morgan agreed that she was well worth looking at, with her sheening dark curly hair, and her exquisite figure in the short-skirted red dress, and her dainty red slippers. Her features neared perfection, her full red lips were smiling, and her big violet eyes with their long, dark lashes looked steadily at the large crowd of spectators.

The whole audience appreciated her, that was plain, but Wayne Morgan particularly noted how one big cowboy, who stood right beside him, never took his eyes off the girl. The cowboy was a handsome, good-natured giant of the Southwest. Morgan thought he must weigh over two hundred, and his massive, strong-muscled broad-shouldered frame towered three inches over six feet. Coppery light hair showed under his wide Stetson, cocked jauntily on one side of his head. He had a firm chin, a good nose, and gray-green eyes the color of sagebrush. He wore leather against the thorns of the region, and high black riding boots. Tiny sun wrinkles about his eyes showed how he loved to laugh.

Watching him, Morgan thought, "He's fallen in love with that girl, shore enough." But aloud he said to the cowboy, as he turned to him, shaking his head:

"That's the saddest smile I ever saw."

CHAPTER III

Strike

VAL HARRISON, the big cowboy who had caught Wayne Morgan's eye, frowned as he turned on the man who had spoken to him. He had not known that his interest in the pretty show girl had been noticed, and he resented having his thoughts read.

However, the scowl left the face of the young range rider of the Purple Ridges as he took in the waddy beside him, a typical, wandering cowhand, decent in appearance and evidently meaning no offense.

"I was thinkin' the same myself, waddy," Val Harrison said frankly. "That girl's smile shore is sad."

"She's mighty pretty, but she's miserable."

"I reckon yuh're right. Yuh savvy anything about her?"

The other man shrugged. "No. This is my first visit to the show."

"It ain't mine. I seen it at Pinetown and Valley City. What's yore handle? Mine's Val Harrison, of the Star H. It's my dad's spread. He's John Harrison."

"Mine's Wayne Morgan. I ain't got a job just now, though I'm a cowhand." He paused, then said musingly:

"I wonder what she's afeared of. Yuh reckon it's that snaky herb doctor?"

Val's big fists clenched. "Yuh know, Morgan, her eyes bein' so scared, like a kid's, have kept me follerin' the show down the valley towns! She won't speak to a feller, and keeps to her tent when she ain't workin', though now and then she takes a stroll. If I thought that smooth dude—" He broke off, and his face reddened. "Mebbe it ain't none of my business. They say she's his niece but she shore don't care much about him. I got savvy enough to see that. I'm goin' up there and buy a couple more bottles of Elixir from her. I've spent two months' wages on the swill, then throwed it away."

"Yuh know her name?" asked Morgan.

"Shore do. It's Louise Allen."

Morgan followed the big Harrison as he shouldered a way to the stage, where Louise was selling bottles of Elixir. Men were shelling out half dollars for the privilege of accepting a bottle from her small white hands, with a smile thrown in.

The violet eyes, Wayne Morgan noted, rose to meet Harrison's sage-colored gaze. The girl recognized him, no doubt of it, as an ardent admirer. He had been trailing the show through the valley towns, and had attempted to strike up an acquaintance but Louise Allen would not encourage him.

Pink touched her cheeks, and she dropped her long lashes as she accepted Harrison's silver dollar for two bottles of Elixir.

"I wish yuh'd tell me what's wrong," murmured Val so that only Louise heard. "I ain't meanin' to be fresh, but yuh look so worried it—it hurts me."

THE crowd was thinning out. The amusement was over and those who had wished to try the Magic Elixir had paid in their silver and retired with their bottles. As always had happened when Val Harrison had tried to talk to Louise Allen, Blackie Salem had edged over and was scowling at them.

"Run along, waddy," Salem ordered gruffly. "The lady don't want to be annoyed."

"That's for her to say, not you, Salem. Keep yore oar outa this."

Salem made a clucking sound with his thin lips, and Cromo, the Apache, slid near, while Buff Burton, dropping

his props which he had been gathering together, came rolling over with his grizzly bear gait, huge fists clenched, small eyes blinking.

"Go on—duck!" Salem snarled. "You're a nuisance, cowboy. We'll give you a fight if you want it!"

"Please," Louise said quickly, "please go away, sir. I—I don't want anything to do with you."

"Wait, ma'am," begged Harrison. "I'm worried about yuh and I can help yuh if yuh'll jest say the word."

She seemed to be hesitating for an instant, then Salem seized her by the wrist impatiently.

"Go to your tent, Louise," he ordered. "We'll tend to this yokel."

"Keep yore paws off her, Salem!"

Young Harrison seized Salem's wrist and ripped him away from the girl.

"No—stop—look out—" screamed Louise, her violet eyes wide with alarm, for Cromo had whipped a knife from his sash and started in as Harrison laid hands on Blackie Salem. Buff Burton lunged, too, getting a neck-breaking grip on the young waddy.

Salem struck back, slapping Val in the face as Buff Burton's great weight and strength forced Val staggering back. The Apache, like a cat on his feet, danced in.

"Cromo—don't cut him!" cried Louise.

She tried to run in, to help Val, but Salem seized her and flung her back.

"Get to your tent," he shouted, beet-red under his sallow skin.

Harrison lashed out at the thick-necked Burton but his fists, though well directed and hard, seemed to have little effect. He managed to throw the strong man off but just as he started to his feet, Cromo seized his belt and pulled him back, while Blackie Salem, snatching up a handy club, hit him a clip alongside the ear. That dazed him.

The Apache and the strong man fell on him and were beating him, when a level voice shouted:

"Lay off that or I'll part yore scalp for yuh!"

Harrison's new acquaintance, Wayne Morgan, stood there with drawn Colt. Already Morgan had decided that Harrison's belief that the girl was terrified, living in dread of Blackie Salem, was justified. This brutal attack crystalized matters.

Under the gun, Buff Burton and Cromo and Salem froze. And the steady voice, the keen blue eyes, commanded instant respect.

Harrison rose, brushing off sawdust and dirt. He was used to hard knocks, but Morgan's action had saved him from a serious beating.

"I'll tend to you later, Salem," he muttered. "Now, ma'am, will yuh talk and tell us what we can do to help yuh?"

"No—go away," Louise said.

She turned and ran from the tent, and Salem laughed harshly.

"See? You've made all this fuss over nothing. We have to take care of a good many mashers like you, cowboy. As for you, mister"—he scowled at Morgan— "put your gun She told you herself to beat it."

"C'mon, Harrison," said Morgan. "Let's get a drink."

THE two waddies hurried from the tent and retired to the Last Chance Saloon. There was a bar with a mirror over it, sawdust on the floor, tables on the side. A piano was being thumped in a corner. Harrison and Morgan sat down at a table and ordered drinks.

"That's the way it goes," Val told his new friend. "I come close to havin' a run-in with 'em before. Thanks for the hand, Morgan."

"Don't mention it. I don't fancy that Salem hombre myself, Harrison. He's got a mean eye."

"I ain't licked yet!" declared Harrison. "But I'll have to go on home

now, for my dad just sent me word my cousin Keith Harrison's body was found near the road 'tween here and Pinetown. Somebody shot him."

Wayne Morgan seemed much interested.

"Who done it? Do they savvy?"

"The Masked Rider," Val Harrison said promptly. "He was seen on the road about the time Keith was murdered. Looked like a holdup."

"The Masked Rider! Who seen him?"

"Dunno," Harrison shrugged. "I've heard tell of that feller though. Some say he helps out folks in trouble and they call him the Robin Hood outlaw. But he shore didn't help us out none by killin' pore Keith. Keith wouldn't harm a fly."

"Mebbe the Masked Rider didn't shoot him."

"Well, I heard Blackie Salem tell the bartender here the Masked Rider done it. 'Course he musta heard it from somebody else. . . ."

IN the early morning, Blackie Salem, followed by his Buff Burton and Apache Cromo, pushed through the thick ridge trails. They rode slowly, eyes on the ground, and now and then Salem would curse.

"This is loco, Blackie," growled the heavy Burton, who did not take well to long trips on horseback.

Cromo, out ahead, hissed a warning. Quickly they caught up with the Apache, who had stopped his rangy mustang, which he rode with only a blanket for a saddle.

"What's up, Cromo?" asked Blackie.

The Apache pointed a bony finger down the vista of the deer trail they had been following.

It was gorgeous country, great rock spires and ridges of varied hues sticking to the azure sky, the crowns of the mountains rusty, the lower parts clad in dusty green. There were cozy vales where ranchers lived. Feeder streams had cut deep canyons on their way to join the Aravaipa.

Blackie Salem saw two cowboys, in leather and Stetsons. Their horses, with reins to the ground, were near at hand. The two were squatted down, head to head, and the sunlight caught something that scintillated in the hand of one of the waddies.

"What's he found?" grunted Buff Burton.

Cromo had taken his rifle from its sling as the trio rode on. Nearer the cowboys, they dismounted and crept on afoot, until some of their conversation was brought to them by the gentle west wind.

"By jacks, Charlie," one cowboy was exclaiming, "I believe it is!" He turned over in his fingers what he had picked up.

"Shore, no doubt of it, Joe," declared the other waddy. "What yuh make of it, pardner?"

[*Turn page*]

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"I've heard tell they're picked up loose in burnt-out volcano country like this. Let's see can we find more. Mum's the word, boy, till we make shore. If this leaks out there'll be a rush and we deserve first pick of claims, bein' the finders."

CROMO raised his rifle to his bronzed shoulder and took steady aim, but with a curse Blackie Salem seized the barrel.

"You fool, Cromo! Don't shoot!"

The Apache turned his shoe-black eyes on his boss.

"You theenck—" he muttered.

"I do. Don't you realize what this land 'll be worth, once news of this strike leaks out? Why, it'll fetch a fortune per section! It will panic the nation. And you try to kill the finders! Why, you poor fool, can't yuh see the whole new big idea that's opening up from what we see now? It'll make us all rich!"

They spied on the two cowboys, who were completely engrossed in their startling strike. Charlie and Joe picked up two more of the little specimens that had excited them. Then they mounted and rode off toward Saddleville.

"We've got to work fast now," said Blackie, an eager glint in his deep-set eyes. "I'll option as much of the land in this district as possible in the next few days, 'fore the whole world's in here."

"How?" asked Buff Burton.

"We have enough cash to take options on the whole Purple Ridges. Ranchers own big tracts and a hundred dollars apiece to them will cinch it legal. Then we sell claims off in small chunks and take our profits. First man to see is John Harrison, who runs the Star H. He's the biggest cowman in this neighborhood."

"Yuh savvy everything, Blackie," said Buff Burton admiringly.

"We've never hit anything as big as this, nowhere near it, boys," Blackie said jubilantly. "Win out, and we're millionaires! Fetch the horses, Cromo. We're heading for the Star H."

CHAPTER IV

A Rancher Dies

WITH such huge profits in sight, and gloating over the prospect, the three rascals, Salem, Burton and Cromo, started down into the deep valley for the other side of the creek to the Star H.

Cromo, as usual, led them, his keen nostrils widened to the breeze like a hunting animal's. It seemed that he could actually smell trouble, when it lay ahead. The Apache hated most white men with an implacable and murderous lust. Only to Salem, who had been made a chief in his tribe, and Burton, did he show anything that resembled friendship. Cunning, quick as a snake to strike, Cromo had killed so many of his hereditary enemies that he had lost count of his victims. Blood, once tasted by such a man, became a necessary part of life.

But the Apache had to pull up and wait, to see what made Blackie Salem so slow as they moved on the trails.

"What you do?" Cromo asked, impatient over Blackie's loitering.

Salem, immersed in his thoughts, shook his head, frowning at his aide.

"Tell you later," he said. "Keep a sharp watch, Cromo. I don't want to be spotted around these parts. Maybe it'll be safer if we wait till after dark to visit Harrison's."

They spent the day scouting the Purple Ridges, and Salem checked up on what land he must have to clean up on the great strike. They ate from their saddle-bags and watered the horses at the creek. As the purple hues deepened on the hills they sat their mustangs on a slope, looking down on the flat-roofed buildings of

the Star H, nestling on the level land along the stream.

After dark they drew up well out from the rambling ranchhouse, and Salem dismounted.

"Buff, with me," he ordered. "Cromo, hold the horses and keep an eye out. Don't let us be disturbed, savvy?"

"Ugh," grunted Cromo, patting his long knife.

Blackie Salem, with the giant Burton rolling at his heels, moved in the dark toward the front of the ranchhouse. A light was burning in the living room and Blackie peeked through a window. "That's Harrison," he whispered. "He's alone. Let's go in."

A tall rancher with iron-gray hair and with face reddened from sun and wind, answered their knock.

"Why, howdy, gents!" he greeted. "Didn't hear yore hosses. Siddown, siddown. Have a drink."

He welcomed them with the hospitality common to the Southwest.

"Thanks," Salem said.

JOHN HARRISON had the same gray-green, level eyes as his son Val, and there was a tinge of copper in his wiry hair. He wore a cropped mustache, and had a strong mouth.

"This is a business call, Harrison," Blackie said. "I'm a representative of the Eastern Beef Company and we're adding to our range. I want to buy your ranch, and I can pay you a cash option at once. We'll pick up the property in thirty days."

"Eastern Beef?" Harrison shook his head. "Never heard of 'em."

"We've operated only in Oregon and Washington up to now."

"Well, well, it don't make any diff, suh. I ain't thinkin' of sellin' the Star H. It's a good outfit and it suits me."

Blackie Salem had a persuasive tongue, and set about talking the rancher into the sale.

"Cromo—don't cut him!" cried Louise (CHAP. III)

"Make a price—even if you won't accept it," he urged. "We can pay well for what we want, Harrison."

"But dang it, I don't want to sell!"

HARRISON began to grow piqued as Salem would not be discouraged. His face went a shade redder. Polite as he was to a guest, Salem's insistence goaded him. Too, neither Salem's smooth exterior nor the looks of the strong man, Buff Burton, pleased him.

He rose, finally, swearing. "I tell yuh the ranch ain't for sale! Now get out and leave me in peace, both of yuh!"

"Wait!" snapped Salem, and put his hand on Harrison's shoulder, pushing him back into his chair.

"Take yore paws off me!" ordered the rancher angrily.

Buff had come closer. "Keep still and let the boss talk," growled the strong man.

"Why—" Harrison choked with rage. "In my own house, yuh—"

Blackie Salem's vile temper suddenly blazed.

"You stubborn old goat," he snarled, "you'll sign over your land to me tonight!"

He saw the infuriated cowman's hand starting for his gun, which lay in its holster on the round table near the chair. With a quick jab, he struck Harrison in the face, knocking him back. The rancher cursed and jumped up, fists flailing. Buff Burton's great arms encircled Harrison. The rancher went down.

His head hit hard, and the tremendous Buff fell on him.

There was a sharp, sickening crack. Harrison's head had gone limp.

"You fool, Buff!" Salem snapped. "You've broken the old idiot's neck!"

Salem knelt by the rancher, whose breath was coming raspingly.

"Dying," muttered Salem. "We can't leave him like this, Buff. Go out and fetch Cromo, pronto!"

He jumped in alarm as the sound of a night bird reached his ears. Cromo, warning him that someone was approaching the ranch!

"Can't wait," he muttered. Pulling a knife from inside his coat, he plunged it into Harrison's jugular vein, finished him.

The two killers hurried out and retreated to the shadows where Cromo held the horses ready. Mounting, they rode off, but as Salem turned and looked back he saw some one in the light streaking from the open front door.

"There's that young hombre who's been following Louise around! Harrison—why, of course! He's the son! And that waddy with him—he's the one who pulled the gun on us, Buff! Morgan, I heard his name is. Ride—fast, now!"

They had several minutes before pursuit could be organized. Well into the hills, in the dense chaparral, their trail hidden by the cunning Cromo, they paused for a breathing spell.

"I think I know how to hook young Harrison," Blackie growled. "But this is too big for us three to handle alone, boys. Cromo, Red Yager's hiding in the Galiuras range with his gang. We saw him when we played Pinetown. Ride over and bring him to me at Saddleville. He's a pal of mine and he's got thirty to forty riders."

Burton and Salem were back at the tent show before dawn. They slept through the morning and then Blackie, spruced up in a fresh white shirt, shaved and washed, his dark clothes brushed, lit a black cheroot and stepped out of his tent into the plaza sunlight.

Saddleville was quietly busy. An undercurrent of eagerness could be felt, however, and Blackie chewed his cigar with ill-concealed impatience.

"Strike news is beginning to spread already," he muttered. "I've got to work fast or it's no go! And a fortune ready to be picked up!"

HE jumped, startled, as a whining voice at his elbow said:

"Hullo, Blackie. For the love of Pete, lend me a few bucks. I'm flat as an Indian's foot, and if I don't get some red-eye I'll go crazy."

Salem swung, looking down into the pale-blue eyes of the slight fellow who had accosted him.

"Chicago Elms, huh?" he said. "You mean to tell me you're broke again, after all your talk of that big job?"

"Sh!" warned Chicago Elms, blinking and glancing around. "These yokel bulls have long ears!"

There was a ferretlike sharpness in Elms' twitching face. His lips were a thin, pale line, his nose was long and pointed, and his hair was a coarse, lustreless brown. He wore a green suit with red checks running through the pattern. He was limping, and although a brown derby was cocked on his head it did not hide the bandage around his skull.

"What did you do? Lose it gambling?"

"No, no." Chicago Elms moaned and groaned. "There I was all set for life. And—I lost it!" He was the picture of misery, and his bony hands shook. "I got to have likker, Blackie, to pull me through. Please!"

Salem drew out a roll of bills, peeled off a couple, and handed them to Elms, who was in such a hurry to reach the saloon that he galloped across the road.

Blackie ran off his show without Cromo that afternoon, but his heart was not in the work. He was thinking of his great plan and he was sitting on spikes, forced to wait for the bandit "Red" Yager before he could execute it.

Cromo came in after dark, bringing Yager with him. Salem, who had a wide acquaintance with all the thieves and outlaws in the country, led the burly, wide-shouldered Yager to his private tent. Cromo stood guard at the door.

"What's up, Blackie?" inquired the bandit.

The notorious gunman and killer, leader of a large band of such desperadoes, was broad, and as big around as a hogshead, for what he lacked in height he made up for in breadth. His hair was bright red, his complexion that of a boiled lobster, and he had a flat nose and snag teeth. Leather pants were tucked into his high riding boots with their huge silver Mexican spurs, and he wore a leather jacket and great tawny Stetson. Double gun-belts were crossed on his great chest.

His reddish-crimsoned eyes shone as he listened to Blackie Salem. Then he nodded and held out his stubby hand.

"It's a deal. We'll start pronto, Blackie. I can put my hand on my gang any time."

"Well—no time to lose," said Blackie. "The news of that strike is beginning to leak out. I can feel it."

"I'll clean the whole blasted country out for yuh, Blackie," Yager declared, patting his guns.

Death and horror had been turned loose on the Purple Ridges.

CHAPTER V

Check

FLOATING through the darkness of the Purple Ridges, came the cry of a mountain lion. Back in the wilds, off the beaten track, Wayne Morgan pushed the roan he was riding toward the sound which came to him dimly.

"Got to act fast," he muttered. "There's the devil to pay!"

Soon he came upon Blue Hawk, who appeared out of the night like some ghostly visitor. Wayne Morgan, wandering waddy, had returned to his

faithful Yaqui trail mate. He had left Blue Hawk hidden outside Saddleville when he had gone into town in his cowboy disguise to check up on Blackie Salem.

Blue Hawk gave him a faint smile.

"Midnight wants you, Senor," he said.

"And I want him, pronto, Blue Hawk! Trouble in bunches has busted loose in this country. Where's our hide-out? Yuh had to shift it?"

"*Si.* Come, I show. Men, bad men, outlaws, come too close."

"They must be the ones that are worryin' me. I've got my Masked Rider outfit right off." Morgan's face was grim.

Blue Hawk knew what that meant. His friend was going to ride, guns blaring, guns that stood between the oppressed and those who sought to destroy and prey.

The Yaqui led Morgan to a deep rock crevice, overgrown with heavy bush. Blue Hawk pushed a way through and in a little hollow, where a crystal spring gushed from the rocks, stood Midnight, the Masked Rider's great mount. As Morgan left the lathered and thorn-scratched hammer-headed roan to be cared for by Blue Hawk Midnight whinnied softly, nuzzling his rider's hand.

"I trailed them slick hombres to their show, Blue Hawk," Morgan said. "I fooled round some with a cowboy named Harrison or I'da been back sooner."

He was discarding the Wayne Morgan garb as he spoke, and from Midnight's saddlebags extracted the Masked Rider's outfit. Quickly donning it, the black cloak covered his body, the domino mask his face, the black hat his head. When again he mounted the great stallion he would once more be the Robin Hood outlaw.

It did not take him long to inform Blue Hawk of all that had occurred since they had parted, and also to tell how he had learned that the killing on the road had been blamed on the Masked Rider!

"Something deep and plenty big goin' on, Blue Hawk," he said grimly. "That dead cowboy we found on the trail the other night was a cousin of young Val Harrison, who's a friend of Wayne Morgan's now. We rode to his Star H ranch, and found his father killed. Happened only a few minutes before we got there! His neck had been broken and then his throat slit. We tried to trail the killers but they hid their sign too clever. And this evening two ranches along the Purple Ridges were attacked, folks shot up, and buildings burnt! I stayed with Val long as I could—he's mighty bad broke up at his dad's death. But when I heard of the raids, I slipped off and came to you."

"Huh! What reason this raiding, Senor?"

"I can't say—yet. But it's brought a wave of terror. I heard a rumor that Red Yager, an outlaw from the Galiuras, is runnin' his gang through here. They gunned a sheriff this afternoon."

IN his black garb the Masked Rider looked huge, even more than his two hundred pounds, with his lean hips and wide shoulders. The cloak billowed out as he mounted Midnight, ready to go into action against the killers that had struck with such vicious, inexplicable fury against the innocent inhabitants of the Purple Ridges.

"Wiped out a whole family, father and two sons—wounded a woman at another place when they killed the rancher," growled the Masked Rider. "I'm goin' after 'em. Later I'll find out why they're doin' it. First thing is to save these folks, Blue Hawk."

"I go, Senor?"

"All right. But stay out of sight. Cover my back trail."

The swift black stallion, Midnight, delighted to be on the go, sprang for-

ward with eager speed. The Masked Rider galloped for the trail through the Purple Ridges, his oiled six-shooters fresh-loaded and a rifle snugged under a long leg.

In the sky hung a ruby haze, dimming off above in smoky clouds, and he headed toward this. The Yager gang had struck there not long before, and he hoped to come up with them and check them before they could attack another ranch. There was no time to probe for the outlaws' motives at the moment. Swift and unerring action was called for.

Brighter grew the fire as the Masked Rider neared it, the wind sweeping his black cloak behind him. When he saw the licking flames through the trees, he swung along a lane to the burning ranchhouse, but saw no attackers of this outfit which a sign showed to be the Circle 2.

"Must've gone on to the next," he muttered.

The red glow reflected from the sheening black's glossy hide as he pulled up the stallion. A dead man in rancher's clothing lay in the front yard, an empty six-shooter in his hand. The heat of the fire blasted at the Masked Rider, and thick smoke drifted off.

A woman cried out, then the man on the black stallion saw that there were two of them, evidently the wife and daughter of the dead cowman. They were tending a couple of wounded cowpunchers who were stretched under a spreading oak tree on the lee side of the house.

"The Masked Rider!" the woman gasped, but not in terror, for two often had stories gone abroad about how eager the Masked Rider always was to assist those in distress.

"What's happened, ma'am?" he called.

The women turned their tear-stained faces toward him.

"Outlaws!" the younger one told him. "They killed my father."

"Which way did they go?" demanded the Masked Rider.

"They rode toward Burns' B-in-a-Box. That's the nearest ranch, five miles up the trail to Saddleville! I heard one yell that they would attack there next."

"I've got to head after 'em," the Masked Rider shouted.

There was little he could do here now. The awful raid had been successful, and murderous guns had broken up a happy family. With teeth gritted and fighting rage in his heart, the Masked Rider pivoted the black stallion and sped on the outlaws' trail.

HALF an hour later, the Masked Rider heard gunfire, and swerved the stallion off the dirt road toward a low-roofed homestead, close to the creek bank. The brush had been cleared for some acres about the ranch, with its house, stables and corrals. Lamps were burning in the main room, and against the light, the Masked Rider could see several horsemen.

They were whooping it up; firing into the windows and doors. Blue-yellow flashes answered from defenders' weapons, stuck from windows and cracks of doors.

The man in the mask drove in, drawing his heavy black pistols. In the hubbub, as the outlaws rode the circle—at least thirty of them—pouring slugs in at the ranchers, he was almost upon Red Yager's gang before he was seen.

"I'd like to get one crack at that Red Yager," he muttered.

He sighted a short-trunked, burly horseman, who was yelling orders. As the man swung, the Masked Rider glimpsed brick-red hair. He threw up his Colt and let go, but just as he shot, one of Red Yager's lieutenants pushed his horse between the Masked Rider and his target. The outlaw aide caught the bullet in his side. He crashed off his horse, uttering a shriek

of anguish.

The Masked Rider sighted again as Yager's big mustang reared and snorted in fright. Red Yager jerked his reins hard and his horse stood up on its hind legs, just in time to take the Masked Rider's lead that had been intended for the bandit chief.

Yager kicked out of the tapped stirrups, sliding to one side as his mount crumpled. And he knew by the sudden downing of his aide, the bullets that had struck his animal, that enemy guns were seeking his killers. But who was firing those guns he could not guess, having noted the position of the Masked Rider only by the pistol flashes. "Turn and fight, yuh fools," roared Red Yager. "They're comin' in behind yuh!"

"They" it seemed to be, for the Masked Rider was firing with terrific speed, moving across the dark horizon. He had them against the light and his violent, unexpected attack demoralized them. Cursing, hard-eyed men crushed against one another as they recoiled under the Masked Rider's fire.

He tried for Yager, but the stubby, broad chief had fallen flat behind his dead horse and was shooting over the animal. The Masked Rider's slugs cut the dirt and plugged into the body of the mustang. Yager's big hat flew off, punctured by a bullet, but the Masked Rider knew the man was not hit and he regretted it.

Resistance was organizing against him. He was, after all, alone against expert gunmen hardened to gunfire and violence. They had split, each man seeking cover, a tree trunk here, a rock there, or a corral fence. The men in the house, taking new heart at the arrival of reinforcements, redoubled their fire and kept the outlaws away from the walls.

"Keep movin'—fast, Midnight," muttered the Masked Rider.

Low over the magnificent stallion he whirled through the dark fringes around the gang's position as Yager's bullets sought his fast shifting figure. He knew that one came within an inch of drilling his head.

His cloak was perforated as it streamed behind him. Lead kissed his flesh, burning his upper arm. But he had reloaded his hot Colts and, ready for another drive, whipped Midnight around and zigzagged back and renewed his attack.

An outlaw screeched, fell on his face from behind a rock near the center, a Masked Rider slug in his brain. Two others took burning lead, and as Red Yager roared orders, vicious concerted fire sought the elusive Masked Rider as he fought to smash the raid on the innocent ranch folk of the Purple Ridges.

The outlaws had hurried around the rear of the flat-roofed adobe ranchhouse, after the Masked Rider's first furious onslaught. They had kept out of easy range of the windows and doors from which the defenders were shooting, and circled far out into the dark shadows.

Now they had reached their objective—the back of the Masked Rider, who had his hands full with the spitting gun line facing him.

IT was impossible to hear anything much over the roaring of the Colts and shotguns, over the steady cursing of the fighting outlaws. The Masked Rider, knowing that to stand still in the open for more than an instant would prove fatal, had to keep riding. At the left were several big spreading live oaks and behind these he could pause to reload for his swift runs up and down the bandit line.

He had not even seen the two had gone around the house. But now they had reached a fence which was several feet high and in its shadow were coming up, ready to shoot the Masked Rider in the spine as he took his short spell behind the oak trees.

"Drive in a hoss for me!" shrieked Red Yager, his bull voice carrying above the banging battle roar. Dismounted, Yager knew he could be picked off, for men were crawling from the ranchhouse with rifles.

"I'll stop that," muttered the Masked Rider, as he saw three bandits spur in with a spare mount for their leader.

Concentrating on the trio which sought to save Yager, he shot from behind the thick oak, his head close to the first gnarled limbs, his horse and body protected to a great extent by the bulk of the trees. His first bullet knocked a bandit dead from his saddle. His second dropped the mustang ridden by another of Yager's killers.

Intent on his task of trying to take Red Yager, the Masked Rider neither heard nor saw the two stealthy gunmen who had crept close up behind him. Over the fence a rifle barrel was stuck, resting on a bar to steady it. At such close range, the killer could not miss. He held the muzzle on the Masked Rider with a steady hand.

CHAPTER VI

Outlaw Way

THE crack of the Winchester startled the Masked Rider just as he took aim at Yager, who was leaping up to seize the mustang run over to him by his men. The Masked Rider caught the sinister whistle of the bullet over his black sombrero, and he turned his masked face to see who was upon him.

"Rifle—and right on me!" he thought.

That Winchester had been fired—but another gun had spat its message of death just an instant ahead of the bandit weapon. The Masked Rider glimpsed the outlaws who had sneaked up along the shadowed fence just as one of the pair threw his hands, his Winchester clattering to the ground as he collapsed. The other outlaw, Colt in hand, was drawing a bead on the Masked Rider.

The weird wail of a mountain lion, off to the rear, told the Masked Rider who had saved him. His faithful comrade, Blue Hawk, had been covering his back all right.

"Thanks, Blue Hawk," he muttered, as he let go with a quick revolver shot, aiming at the glint of light that caught the bandit's pistol barrel.

He watched the would-be drygulcher keel over beside his mate. Then he broke his Colt and ejected the empty shells, shoving in fresh ones. Turning back on the main outlaw gang, he urged the stallion on, picking up speed as he dashed from the live oaks, pistols blaring death and destruction to Red Yager's murderous killers.

By now the red-haired chief had managed to mount, and was already flogging away from the scene of battle.

"Come on, boy!" Yager bellowed. "It's the Masked Rider! We'll get him later! C'mon!"

The Masked Rider had taken fearful toll of Yager's men in the short moments of the red-hot battle. Five dead outlaws lay where they had gone down. Two were mortally wounded, groaning as they writhed to a bandit's finale on the smoking earth. Less seriously injured men had been picked up or had ridden off.

Yager's gang spurred off into the darkness of the woods. The Masked Rider hurried them along with bullets, as cheering men from the house called out to him.

At last, as the whole bunch disappeared into the night, the Masked Rider pulled up, aware that pursuit would be futile in the darkness. He swung Midnight and trotted the lathered stallion, whose nostrils were flared in the excitement of the battle, back to the house.

"Hey, there, Masked Rider!" a Purple Ridges rancher sang out. "Thanks a-mighty! Yuh shore saved our hides! That was Red Yager's big gang, hittin' us without warnin'."

"Keep a sharp lookout, pardner," the Masked Rider warned. "They're liable to be back another night."

"We shore will! I'm Phil Burns, and this is the B-in-a-Box. If ever I can do anything for yuh, lemme know."

"Thanks," the Masked Rider replied.

He could see the sturdy Burns in the light from the front door—an honest, hard-working rancher. His three sons and two daughters and his wife were bunched on the veranda, peering out at the dim figure of the Masked Rider who had saved them from destruction.

"Yuh any idea what Yager's after?" asked the Masked Rider.

"Why, stock, I reckon," Burns said wonderingly. "I s'pose they wanted my mustangs and breed cattle. Don't you?"

THE Masked Rider shrugged. Red Yager would hardly go to such terrific lengths in order to rustle cows and horses. He must know that all-out, wholesale attacks would finally concentrate forces upon him from which he would have to run. There must be another, and much better reason why Yager had gone hog-wild all of a sudden.

"Come in and have a drink," Burns invited. "We'd like to thank yuh right for all yuh've done for us."

"No, I better be ridin'," the Masked Rider said. "Yager might decide to make another strike somewheres else. Take care of yourselves. I'll be around if yuh need me."

He raised his gauntleted hand and, turning Midnight, rode away.

Blue Hawk awaited him out in the darkness.

"Senor! I cover your back."

"Yuh shore did, Blue Hawk, and made a good job of it. Let's ride. I want to make shore them skunks are ridin' out of the Purple Ridges country."

They took up the trail of the running outlaws. But evidently Red Yager and his merrymen had had a stomachful of fighting, for that night at least.

Pausing to check the sign left by the driving hoofs of the gang's horses, the Masked Rider and the Yaqui found that the bandits had ridden over the high ridges into the wilds of the Arizona hinterland.

"Tough men—kill all," observed Blue Hawk. "Why?"

"That's up to us to find out," the Masked Rider said grimly. "Before they do any more damage. But we can't be everywhere at once, and Yager has plenty of hombres ridin' for him."

They went back to the hide-out and slept until dawn. When Blue Hawk arose, he found the Masked Rider donning his waddy costume, assuming the guise of Wayne Morgan again.

"You go?"

"To Saddleville, Blue Hawk, and see if I can pick up any hints on why Yager's busted loose all of a sudden."

He saddled the hammer-headed roan and headed for Saddleville, arriving before noon. Blackie Salem's tent show still stood in the plaza, though Morgan had thought they would be moving on. He was also surprised to find more people around than usual, and the place was buzzing with subdued excitement. Men gathered in small groups, talking together in low tones.

"What's up, hombre?" Morgan inquired of a citizen.

The man shrugged, returning his gaze coolly.

"The sun, waddy," he answered.

Wayne Morgan let the snub go, and strolled over to the Last Chance

Saloon, where a large crowd was collected. Two cowboys who stood at the bar, looking pleased and triumphant, were the center of interest.

"C'mon, Charlie," a big fellow in jackboots, Stetson and leather pants roared, slapping the waddy on the back. "Have another on me!"

"No, have one on me," insisted a townsman. "Joe, you, too."

"Say, I'm so full I'll bust in a sec," the cowboy called Charlie replied. "And if Joe throws in another I'll have to carry him the rest of the way."

"Where yuh goin'?" the cowman beside Charlie asked.

Charlie winked. "Just for a ride, I reckon. It's allowed, ain't it?"

"Shore, shore."

Charlie and Joe, Wayne Morgan saw, were run-of-the-mill waddies, the sort he was posing to be himself. Charlie was long and thin, with a weather-beaten face, a long nose and light-blue eyes. Joe was stubby and wide, with a smiling face and a close-clipped brown mustache. He wore an outfit similar to Charlie's.

Finally they stamped out on their bowed legs, reaching for the reins of their horses flung over the hitch-rail. As they mounted, three dozen other men followed suit, for horses had been ready and waiting. Charlie and Joe, obviously enjoying their importance, cantered off down the road, grinning as they glanced behind to see the train coming in their wake.

Wayne Morgan went into the saloon and ordered a drink. He engaged the bartender in conversation, although the man kept looking out the window.

"Charlie and Joe struck it rich, huh," remarked Morgan casually, as though he knew what it was all about. For he had observed strikes in other parts of the country, and the crowd trailing the two cowboys acted like men trying to discover the location

The Masked Rider's Colt barrel landed square on Burton's skull (CHAP. XII)

of the find.

"But they're purty darned close-mouthed," growled the barkeeper. "The boys been tryin' to give 'em so much to drink that they'll talk but them two are already pickled in whisky. It just rolls off 'em like water off a duck."

A glimmer of light, a tentative explanation for the behavior of Yager's outlaws, hit the Masked Rider.

"Gold's mighty allurin'," he tried on the bartender.

"Gold? 'Tain't gold, hombre."

"Humph! I thought they'd struck a vein somewheres."

"Nope. Bigger'n that—but they ain't sayin' what. All we know is they've made some sorta whoppin' find. Nobody seems to savvy where or what, but the rumor's spread like wildfire. Charlie and Joe can't move a step without bein' follered."

Wayne Morgan had plenty to think over now.

"Yager must savvy what them two cowboys hit on," he decided. "That would explain why he's tryin' to wipe out the Purple Ridges ranchers. But how kin Yager know, if Charlie and Joe haven't told?"

This was a puzzle. The Yager outlaws might be trying to crush landowners, frighten them into selling their sections. But how could Red have come into the picture so quickly?

"Cowboy," a high-pitched voice whined, "when I see you down that golden nectar so nonchalantly, just as if it was plain water, it's torture to me! You might as well snatch a starving babe's milk and drink it up without offerin' said infant even a swig. Why, it's cruelty to animiles."

Wayne Morgan took in the slight Chicago Elms, the ferretlike face with thin, pale lip line, pointed nose and sharp ears. The green-and-red checked suit looked as though it had been slept in, while the brown derby was dented. The pale eyes held an appeal hard to resist, and although Morgan did not fancy the ratty man's general appearance, he rang a silver dollar on the bar.

Then he started, inwardly, recognizing the man. The unconscious victim of the trail whom Blue Hawk had found in the chaparral!

"Thanks a million," cried Elms, licking his lips. "I'll remember you in my last will and testament."

HE downed the large tumblerful of red-eye which was pushed to him over the bar, smacking in pleasure.

"Nothing like it for a tonic," he remarked. "You work around here, waddy?"

"I'm huntin' a ridin' job," Morgan told him. "My name's Wayne Morgan. I can see yuh're a pilgrim."

"Yeah. My name is—Elms." He frowned and growled, "I wish I'd never come to this cursed place."

His vehemence interested Morgan.

"Have another," he said, "and tell me what's wrong."

"Thanks."

The second big tumblerful followed the first. Chicago Elms was thawing out, and accepted a cigar Morgan offered.

"My line is promotion, sir," he told his benefactor. "I get around a good deal and move pretty fast at times."

"I bet yuh do," thought Morgan, figuring that this man who called himself Elms would lie to him, unless the ratty man were completely intoxicated. A thief was not likely to tell an honest person what he was up to, and Morgan had good reason to know this man was a thief.

The batwing doors banged in and Morgan sighted Blackie Salem in the bar mirror. Morgan instantly smelled trouble, especially when the giant Buff Burton, the strong man with his shaven, misshapen pate, rolled in after the showman.

But to his surprise Salem nodded

to him and smiled politely.

"Howdy, Morgan—glad to see you," Salem said jovially. "No hard feelin's, I hope, on account of the little fuss the other day?"

"Not at all, not at all."

"Hello, Chicago," Blackie went on, turning to Elms. "Drinks are on me. I was huntin' for you, Chicago. Want to talk to you. Excuse us, will you, Morgan?"

He ordered the bartender to bring their liquor into the back room. Taking Elms by his skinny arm, Blackie piloted the little man into one of the rear drinking rooms. Burton ambled after them, giving Morgan a scowl as he passed.

"Salem's shore changed his tune," thought Morgan. "I wonder what he's up to with this Chicago Elms, as he called him?"

He edged down the bar, thinking he might overhear what went on in the back room, but Blackie and Elms were gone only a few minutes when they emerged.

"Thanks, Blackie," Morgan heard Elms saying gratefully. "That stake'll set me up!"

"On your way, pard," Salem answered.

Elms hurried past Wayne Morgan, with a quick nod; Salem paused, drink in hand.

"Seen Val Harrison lately?" he asked. "I'd like to tell him how sorry I feel about that brush we had. He's welcome to come round the show any time he wants. You, too, Morgan. You see, we have a lot of trouble with mashers, but we want to be friends with folks like Harrison and you."

"Well, dawggone, he's got religion or somethin'," mused Morgan, putting on a pleasant front to match Blackie's. "First he stakes Elms, then forgives Val and me! He conked Elms that dark night for some reason, too, but Elms don't know it."

Blackie gave Buff Burton a signal, and the big fellow rolled over to the front window, looking out on the dusty street. Salem went on with his drink.

"Lots of excitement here," Blackie remarked pleasantly to Wayne Morgan. "Looks like a strike of some kind. What do you figure, Morgan? I'd like to get in on it, if it's something good."

"Well, them two waddies, Charlie and Joe, found somethin', no doubt of it," said Morgan. "Here they come back now, with their followers!"

CHAPTER VII

Decoy

SLOWLY the cowboys, Charlie and Joe, rode along the plaza, grinning from ear to ear, as the would-be rushers trailed them. They had just been out for a little canter and were still enjoying the excitement their presence caused.

Dismounting, Charlie and Joe went over to the little post-office attached to the general store, and entered it. When they reappeared, one carrying a small package, and the other a letter, a loud cheer rang out.

"Go on, now, buys," ordered Joe. "Me'n Charlie got to read what this says, savvy? If yuh leave us alone awhile, we may tell yuh somethin'."

Blackie Salem threw down his drink, as Morgan heard Buff Burton give a grunt.

"I'll have to be runnin', Morgan," said Blackie. "See you again."

The tall showman hurried from the saloon and, with Buff at his heels, crossed toward his tents. Wayne Morgan strolled over to look out the wide window.

Val Harrison was dismounting at the tent show.

"Now what?" muttered Morgan, as he saw Blackie Salem shake hands with Harrison. And as Wayne Mor-

gan left the saloon, he heard Blackie Salem sing out:

"Oh, Louise! Here's a friend to see you."

She came out, shyly, and the towering young rancher, Val Harrison, took her hand.

Morgan rolled a cigarette, slouched in the shade of the building. Harrison, deeply in love with Louise, was evidently overjoyed to be able to talk to her. There was sadness in the rancher's face, though. The murder of his father had been a terrible blow to him, and he still showed the strain, but there was no doubt that Louise was a tremendous comfort to him in his grief.

She kept her eyes cast down, as they walked together across the plaza, nearing Morgan.

"Afternoon, Val," Morgan sang out.

"Oh—howdy, Wayne. Glad to see yuh. You know Miss Louise."

Louise wore a plain blue dress and a ribbon bound her curly dark hair. She looked up at Morgan, and a faint smile touched her red lips.

"She's still mighty sad," thought Morgan. "Scared to death. But she does like Val."

"We're goin' for a cup of coffee," Harrison said, and it was plain to Morgan that his new friend wanted to be alone with Louise. He wouldn't have interfered for the world.

"I got somethings to tend to," he said. "I'll see yuh later, Val."

Chicago Elms had ridden out of town. Charlie and Joe, discoverers of the mysterious wealth which had so upset the Purple Ridges, headed off for their quarters in a log cabin on the outskirts of the town, while eager rushers gathered here and there, discussing the excitement.

"I need to find out what everybody's after," mused Wayne Morgan. "I reckon there's one quick way to do it."

Saddling the hammer-headed roan, a swift ride took him within signaling distance of Blue Hawk. Presently the Yaqui appeared, leading Midnight. The Masked Rider outfit was packed in the black stallion's warsacks.

"Senor," Blue Hawk said, greeting him with the smile he reserved for his partner alone, "you fight again?"

"Soon, Blue Hawk. What's that paper yuh got in yore belt?"

"Ees for you," replied the Yaqui.

HE handed the dirty sheet of paper, folded once, with two pinholes in it, to Morgan. Wayne Morgan scanned it quickly. The message, addressed "To The Masked Rider," read:

> Don't be a fool. Let's talk it over. Why should we fight each other? Meet me at the spring at the foot of the Ruby Cliff at 8 tomorrow night.
>
> Red.

"Where'd yuh find this, Blue Hawk?" growled Morgan.

"On trail near where we las' see Yager. Pinned to bush." He added quickly: "You don't go, Senor? Could be trap."

"Yeah, but I figger I might learn somethin', Blue Hawk. However, I got plenty to do between now and then. I want yuh to trail me and wait for me outside Saddleville. I'll show yuh where, on the way. Fetch Midnight."

It was around ten p.m. when Wayne Morgan returned to Saddleville. The saloons were doing a rushing business, and oil lamps gleamed yellow in the darkness. A puffy wind picked up the plaza dust and hurled it into faces.

A light burning was in Louise Allen's tent where Blackie Salem appeared, walking rapidly toward the girl's quarters. Leaving the roan, Morgan slipped quietly up behind a nearby wagon, from where he could hear what Blackie said without being seen.

"Louise!" called Blackie gruffly.

Her face, a pale oval in the dimness,

showed at the flap.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

"What did he say?" Salem asked eagerly.

"Nothing," the girl said, and there was stubborn spirit in her voice.

"You didn't even ask him then!" Fury was in Salem's tone and he seized her wrist. Louise gave a low cry of pain. "What did I tell you?" growled Blackie. "It was your last chance, and his too! You ain't done him a favor, you little fool."

"I won't do it, not even if you kill me! Stop it, Blackie—don't hurt me. I can't stand any more!"

"Me, either," muttered Morgan, flitting around the back of the wagon.

He caught Salem by the arm and ripped him away from the startled girl.

"What in—" snapped Blackie, whirling, trying to reach for his gun.

"No yuh don't, yuh black-hearted snake," gritted Morgan.

His powerful fist drove straight into Salem's face. The cartilage of the thin nose crunched sickeningly. Salem landed full on his spine in the dirt. His wind was knocked out and he swore in short gasps. He knew that he needed help.

"Buff-Cromo! he called weakly.

"Look out!" cried Louise. "Oh, please—look behind you!"

Just in time Morgan heeded her warning. Cromo, the silent Apache, was almost upon him and in the faint light the long blade of his murderous knife glinted as he lifted it above Morgan's back. Morgan ducked, whipping his lithe body to one side, and caught the Apache's descending wrist on his forearm bone, a dangerous trick but one which he performed with unerring precision. A booted, spurred foot rose and doubled the snaky Indian up, while he fell to the earth, propelled by the force of his own rush.

Buff Burton, a piece of iron pipe in one hand, rolled up. He saw the crouched Morgan and started for him.

But Morgan had whipped a gun from its holster, and the hammer spur was back under his thumb.

"Stand back," he snarled, "or I'll drill yuh, Burton!"

THE giant hesitated, glancing at Blackie. "Get out of here, Morgan!" Salem cried. "We don't want any truck with you. Beat it."

"Will you come, Louise?" Morgan inquired coolly.

"No! Please hurry—go away!"

Wayne Morgan backed off. He picked up his horse and rode over to the biggest of the town saloons. There he saw Val Harrison, sitting at a table in the back, having a drink.

"Howdy, Morgan!" sang out Harrison. He seemed cheerier than when Morgan had last seen him. "I spent the evenin' with Louise. She's a wonderful girl."

"Yeah, she is. Did yuh have any truck with Salem?"

"Why, not much. He asked me, casual-like, if I'd like to sell the ranch to him, but I said no, I reckoned on keepin' it. Isn't she pretty, Wayne? She's sweet, too."

"Did Louise ask yuh anything about sellin'?"

"No. Not a word."

Swift thoughts raced through Morgan's keen brain.

"S'pose Blackie tried to get John Harrison to sell," he mused, "hopin' to clean up on the rush. Harrison said no, and they had a fight, and Blackie and Buff killed him." Signs all fitted to this theory.

"What do yuh s'pose she'd say," Val asked, "if I begged her to marry me, Wayne?"

"Why not try it?"

Morgan and his big friend were sitting close to an open window which gave out on a narrow, dark side alley.

"I don't fancy that winder," Morgan mused. "Too easy for a shot to

come through—"

Suddenly he shifted, a hand flying to his gun, for he had heard a footstep just outside.

"Val, Val!" came a soft whisper.

"It's Louise!" Harrison exclaimed, leaping up and sticking his head out the window. "What's wrong?"

"Val, please, there's no time to talk. Get your horse and leave town and tell your friend Wayne Morgan to go, too."

"We'll be right out," Morgan said quickly. "Wait, Louise."

"No—"

But they were already started for the back exit, Morgan in the lead. The two men confronted the girl in the narrow way.

"Blackie's furious," she said, trembling violently. "He'll kill you both."

"Did he say that" growled Morgan.

Val Harrison reached out his arm and gathered Louise in. She began to cry, softly, and let him hold her.

"Yuh're goin' to marry me, Louise," Harrison declared. "I'll protect yuh."

Morgan glanced up at the street end of the bypass. A tall figure in black, followed by the giant Buff Burton, showed crossing the plaza. On Louise Allen's trail, without a doubt.

"No time to lose," Morgan said, his voice low. "Take her to yore ranch, Val, and see she ain't harmed. I'll tend to Salem and his pards."

HARRISON agreed enthusiastically.

"My aunt's there, Louise, and she'll help yuh. Yuh can't stay with them dogs any longer."

In her eyes shone sudden, wild hope, the hope of escape from her unbearable life. But then she shook her head.

"It will mean your death, Val. You don't know Blackie the way I do. He—he's vicious, a killer."

"What's he up to now, Louise?" Morgan asked. "What's he after here?"

"I don't know, for sure. He told me I was to make Val sell the ranch to him. He's a terrible man. And Cromo and Buff do anything he tells them to. Please go now! There they come!"

A shrill whistle sounded from Tin Can Alley, and Wayne Morgan realized that the Apache had them cut off at the other end of the passage, and was calling Salem. Blackie and Buff, both armed, turned toward the alley.

"Hustle!" urged Morgan. "There's hosses down the line, Val. Take Louise to the Star H pronto."

"And you?" asked Harrison.

"I'll be all right. Do what I say, now. There's no time to lose."

Harrison scooped Louise up in his big arms. She clung to him as he carried her swiftly in Morgan's wake. Cromo lurked close at hand, at that end of the alley. And Buff Burton and Salem were starting through from the street.

CHAPTER VIII

Escape

MORGAN jumped out into Tin Can Alley. Shafts of lights came from back windows of homes and saloons, and the stables loomed dark in the night. He had a Colt in one hand, and with his body he was shielding Louise and Val as they swung to the right, according to his directing hand.

A gun suddenly blared close at hand and by its flash, Morgan glimpsed the dark, vicious face of Cromo. The Indian was crouched behind the stone base of a big stable, was trying to hold them for Salem.

"Stop, thief! Robbers!"

The high-pitched shriek came from Blackie Salem. But Wayne Morgan was too busy to bother about Blackie and Burton for the moment. The first

slug from the Apache's pistol had torn his shirt, and plugged into the wall. The second burned his flesh as he moved, shooting at the flash of the Indian's gun.

His bullet hit the rock and spattered into fragments, close to Cromo's eyes. It blinded the Apache long enough for Val to turn out of sight, carrying Louise.

Wayne Morgan shifted quickly as Cromo tried for him again. Crouched down, he dueled with the sinister Apache. Salem and Burton were coming on, yelling, "Thief! Robber! Murder!" at the tops of their voices.

"They'll shoot me down and swear I tried to hold 'em up," figured Morgan.

It was too hot to remain there. Cromo hunted him with lead, while Blackie opened up with his pistol. Morgan's six-shooter peppered the stone wall sheltering the Apache, to hold him for a moment. A close one, from Blackie's gun, whizzed past Morgan's ear. He leaped up and ran along Tin Can Alley, shooting over his shoulder. Darting into a gap between stables, he was out of their sight for the instant.

Harrison and Louise were gone. Val would pick up a couple of fast horses and start for the Star H. Morgan meant to lead Salem a chase and give his friends a chance to get away.

Men were running out, taking up Blackie's tallyho, forming into a blind mob to pursue the supposed robber.

Aware that Salem, Burton and Cromo might very well end his career and get away with it by saying he had held the show up, Wayne Morgan circled back along the line of barns. Cromo suddenly darted out, shooting. Morgan blasted the Apache back, knew he had scored a hit, but how serious it was he could not say in the darkness. At least the Indian stopped shooting. Salem led the pursuit toward Morgan's gunshots.

At last Morgan could dash up to the main street and head for the hammer-headed roan, standing in the plaza. He hit leather, and as Salem and the mob emerged hot on his trail, he gave a whoop of triumph, shot into the air, and galloped off in the opposite direction to the Star H.

Heated up by the exhilaration of the chase, many of them grabbed mustangs and set out after him, and he rode hard for a time before he shook them off. Then he slowed down and circled back.

It was after midnight when he gave his low call which was answered by Blue Hawk.

"I'm goin' back, Blue Hawk, as the Masked Rider," he said. "The town's quietin' down some."

THE Yaqui silently assisted him as he changed to the black cape, black Stetson and domino mask. Slipping on his black gauntlets, the for-

[*Turn page*]

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TRAIL OF THE GHOST RIDERS

A Complete Texas Ranger Novel

By BRADFORD SCOTT

NOW ON SALE EVERYWHERE

10c AT ALL STANDS

mer waddy was now the Masked Rider. And as the Masked Rider he started for Saddleville.

The saloons were still brightly lit, men were about the streets, and a light was burning in the log cabin in which Charlie and Joe, the discoverers of the Purple Ridges strike, were living. Dismounting from the stallion, the black-clad figure flitted near, peeked inside through the small, narrow window. The two cowboys were lying in their bunks, smoking, and speaking in low voices.

The Masked Rider slid around to the front door. Like most portals in that area, it was not locked. The Masked Rider shoved it open and stepped inside.

"Well, for—" gasped the long, slender Charlie, as he saw the burly, stalwart figure in black.

Through the slits in the domino mask the Masked Rider's eyes glinted.

"Why—that's the Masked Rider, Charlie!" the wide-bodied Joe cried.

"Well?" growled Charlie, pulling himself together and casting a longing glance at his six-gun, which was hanging on the back of a chair several feet from his hand. "What yuh want, outlaw?"

"Do as I say, boys," the Masked Rider ordered easily, "and nobody'll be hurt. Where's that package of specimens yuh got back from the government assayers? And I'd like to see the letter, too."

"Shucks," Charlie said. "So yuh're only a common garden variety crook after all! I always heard yuh was fair and square with folks."

"I can't waste any time," the Masked Rider said, his black-stocked guns close to his gloved hands.

"Better do what he says, Charlie," advised Joe.

Charlie agreed with a shrug. "Yuh'll find it all there in the table drawer, blast yuh."

The Masked Rider, without taking his eyes off the two cowboys, opened the drawer. He extracted the little box with his left hand and opened it. In some cotton were packed several small, rough brilliants, half a dozen of them. They caught the smoky light with scintillating reflections, bluish-white glints coming from the surfaces where they had been cleaned.

The letter said, in part:

Gentlemen:
The enclosed are rough diamonds of a fine grade. They may occur in any burnt-out volcano country—

"Huh!" grunted the Masked Rider. "Diamonds! And real ones. Yuh picked 'em up in the Purple Ridges country?"

"We ain't said where and we don't intend to," Charlie said hotly. "Go on and shoot if yuh want to."

"I'm not shootin'," the Masked Rider said softly. He tossed the diamonds and the official report on the table and backed to the door. "Thanks, boys. I won't trouble yuh further."

They blinked in astonishment as the masked man jumped out, shutting the door and leaving without taking anything from them.

"Funny way to pull a hold-up!" the Masked Rider heard Joe exclaim, as he flitted past the open window on his way back to Midnight.

STEP by step the Masked Rider was working out the mysterious business. These waddies, Charlie and Joe, were decent, honest fellows. They were not liars and cheats, and they had actually picked up rough diamonds in the Purple Ridges. They had been unable to hold in the secret that they had made a strike, although so far they had concealed from the public what their find was and where they had made it.

"But Red Yager," mused the Masked Rider, "and Blackie Salem, too, savvy where the diamonds were found. That's a cinch. They're tryin' to get hold of the land 'fore the real rush

begins. They'd clean up a million."

His fingers slid into an inside pocket, and searching in the usual rubble of such a spot, picked out a tiny, hard object—the small, uneven piece of shiny mineral he had found the night he had started on Salem's evil trail. "By jacks, *this* is a diamond!" he muttered. "One of 'em."

He had important facts in his possession now. It was up to him to work out protection for the ranchers who owned the range, and honest rushers who might want to purchase claims. It was a startling strike and thousands of fortune hunters would come in from all parts of the West when it leaked out.

He half expected Charlie and Joe to raise a hue and cry, but the two cowboys kept quiet. The Masked Rider leaped on his great horse and rode with the wind out of Saddleville.

"I've got to make shore first that Val and Louise are plumb protected," he muttered, low over Midnight. "They're the salt of the earth. Salem wants the Star H and he won't let Harrison marry Louise without a fight."

He realized how dangerous the sleek medicine man was, with his Apache killer and the giant Burton ready to do his bidding. And in the Masked Rider's clever mind was a dark suspicion that perhaps Red Yager and Salem might be connected.

"I'll check that," he thought, "tomorrer night."

Picking up Blue Hawk, he rode for the Star H. Shifting to the Wayne Morgan garb, he arrived alone, around eight in the morning. Harrison greeted him heartily.

"All's well," the young rancher told him. "Thanks to you, Morgan. We wouldn'ta got clear if yuh hadn't helped us. My aunt Sophy's takin' care of Louise. She is Blackie Salem's niece, yuh see, and he's made her work in the show for him ever since she was fourteen. But she's always been scared of him. He's done some terrible things, she told me. We're goin' to be married as soon as things quiet down."

"That's great," Morgan said. "Now I want yuh to keep a sharp watch out, Val. Salem's right shore to make trouble, savvy? And Red Yager's gang is lurkin' in these parts. How many men yuh got here?"

"Three, jest now. Cowboys."

"Better'n nothin'. Stand a guard after dark, and keep yore guns loaded and ready. Yuh got no intention of sellin' yore land, have yuh?"

"Nope. I mean to run the ranch for Louise. It'll be our home. Besides, Dad wanted me to keep it."

"Good. I'll have a bite with yuh and then I'll be ridin'."

"Why not stick around, Wayne?"

"Thanks. But I heard of a job over the other side of the Ridges."

"Yuh're welcome to a ridin' job here any time," offered Harrison.

"That's mighty white of yuh, Val. Mebbe I'll take yuh up later. Say, yuh ever hear tell of the Ruby Cliff in these parts?"

"Shore," said Harrison. "Everybody savvies where that is. 'Tain't but six miles from here as the crow flies."

"Yeah? Can yuh tell me how to get there?"

"Easy. My road runs into the main one through the valleys. Yuh take the second lane to the right after yuh hit the road to Saddleville. An hour's gallop would fetch yuh to the Ruby Cliff."

"Thanks. Now I could shore swaller a bite and a drink."

WAYNE MORGAN saw Louise Allen after he had eaten. Her face was still more lovely than he remembered it, he thought, but her eyes were still apprehensive. The way she watched Val Harrison showed her love and trust, her pride in her sweetheart. New hope had come to her.

When Wayne Morgan rode away

from the Star H, connecting with his faithful friend, Blue Hawk, they started for Ruby Cliff, to look over the land in the daylight. The Masked Rider was too careful a campaigner to run into a blind trap in the darkness.

He meant to meet Red Yager there. That, he was aware, was placing himself in enemy hands, murderous hands, but he figured what he might learn from Yager might be worth the terrific risk.

CHAPTER IX

Outlaw End

YELLOW, smoky lanterns burned in two niches of Ruby Cliff, which jutted into the starlit night. Brush fringed the cliff and the narrow trail leading to it swung up a slope, to enter dense evergreen woods. On the other side, the escarpment was not so steep, but was gullied by rain making it impossible for a horse to climb it.

Half a dozen ferocious-faced men squatted at the base of Ruby Cliff, whose red hue took the rays of the lights with a bloody reflection.

A horse's hoofs clopped on the trail, and the waiting outlaws grew alert.

"Here he comes," grunted one.

A black mustang that could have been taken for Midnight loomed from the shadows, his rider a man in black cape, gloves and cap with a domino mask covering his upper face—the famous Masked Rider. He saw the sinister band awaiting him and jerked his horse to a quick stop, keeping in the shadow of a tall spruce that tried to challenge the supremacy of Ruby Cliff.

"Here I am, gents," he sang out. "Where's Red Yager?"

"He's waitin' for yuh, Masked Rider," a bandit lieutenant called back. "C'mon. There's only a few of us. We're friends."

"Tell Yager to come out first," growled the tall man.

"All right. . . . Hey, Red! He's here."

A short, wide man shoved out from the bush. Guns were strapped in the double circlets at his waist, with cartridge belts on his barrel chest. Keenly the Masked Rider regarded the terrible bandit chieftain, scourge of the country. Before now he had glimpsed Yager only from a distance and in the dark during that great gunfight at the ranch where, with only Blue Hawk to cover him, the Masked Rider had routed the bandit gang alone. Now he saw the outlaw clearly as the lantern light caught the bright red hair, untidy and thick under a strapped Stetson, the ugly features and the cruel lips from which a cigarette dangled. The Masked Rider dismounted and stepped in to face them all; brutal leader and his armed followers.

"Glad yuh had savvy enough to show up, Masked Rider," Red Yager greeted bluntly. "We oughta be able to make a deal. We're in the same business."

"How about the other night, Yager?" growled the Masked Rider.

"Shucks, no hard feelin's. When I see a good fightin' man I'd rather enlist him than go ag'in him." He showed his snag teeth in a grin.

The wind rustled the tops of the evergreens. A bandit shifted his spurred boot and a stone clacked as it rolled. The bush was silent. Back a few yards the black mustang had put down its muzzle to crop at the coarse bunch grass.

The Masked Rider was in the circle of light from the lanterns now, as were Yager and his followers.

"I just fetched along a few of my boys," Yager went on to explain. "I got plenty more, and we got a cozy hide-out back of the Ridges. Now here's my prop'sition: You join up

with us and yuh can write yore own ticket. There's a fortune in what we're doin' right now."

"We, huh?" said the Masked Rider. "How many would have to be cut in if I throw in with yuh?"

Yager cleared his throat. "The hombre whose idea it is splits fifty-fifty with me. We pay our men ourselves. I'm givin' mine double wages when we've cleaned up. As for you, take yore choice of a quarter what I'll get or a thousand cold cash. The fightin' shouldn't last more'n a few days."

"Yuh mean to clean out the Purple Ridges? And specially the Star H. Is that it?"

YAGER'S eyes narrowed, as he cast a sharp look up into the masked eyes.

"Yuh savvy a lot, don't yuh?"

"Why not? I was in Saddleville last night, and talked with a friend of yores."

Yager started. "Yuh mean—?"

"Blackie Salem," the Masked Rider finished glibly, and the way Yager blinked told him he was right. Salem and Yager did have a connection. "Blackie made me a better offer," he said carelessly.

"Huh? Well, that suits me! It's all the same. Just fetch yore hoss now and foller me. We're goin' places tonight."

"Where?"

Yager frowned. He was an autocratic leader and did not like to be questioned.

"Yuh're workin' with us, now," he growled. "Yuh got to take my orders, savvy?"

"S'pose I got better ideas?" asked the Masked Rider coolly, standing his ground.

Yager was losing his patience. "Salem hadn't ought to made yuh an offer without talkin' with me first. Yuh're a good fightin' man, but yuh're butt-headed, like I figgered. We're ridin' now, and I want yuh to do what I say!"

"Just a sec!"

The Masked Rider stepped back, quickly. One of Yager's men had casually started around behind him.

"Yuh hittin' the Star H tonight?" the masked man demanded to know. "If so, I wanta know what I'm doin'."

"Yuh want to know too blasted much! Here, I'll pay yuh some money on the nail."

Yager raised his right hand, the Masked Rider watching it every breath. He had an innate warning, the uneasy sensation of being in a trap. But he had expected that. Red Yager was not a man to forgive and forget the terrific beating the Masked Rider had given his gang. He might buy the Masked Rider off, but never would he trust him to go on a job.

The outlaw who had tried to get around behind the masked man had stopped. He cast a quick look at Yager, who frowned and shook his head slightly.

Action broke wide open then, without warning. Red Yager, imperious by nature, either believed he had the jump on his enemy, or that at such close quarters no man would dare buck seven-to-one. The squat chieftain saw his chance to finish off the one man who was standing between the ranchers of the Purple Ridges and Salem's great scheme.

Hand rising, supposedly to get money out of his inner belt to give to the new recruit, Red Yager made his draw, a swift, efficient and trained pull of a familiar weapon, checked and ready to shoot. Yager's hand was as used to the movement of that draw as his lungs were to breathing. It had practically come to be instinct.

At the same instant, too, three of his aides started for their guns, all concentrated on the Masked Rider. Whether they meant to kill or simply to make him a prisoner, was not evident. But probably Yager meant to finish him off then and there to

get him out of the way.

The Masked Rider, however, had taken everything into consideration. His hands hung easily at his lean hips, with the black-stocked Colts waiting there, as ready for action as Yager's fancy guns. His right hand moved like a darting moonbeam, whipped up a gun with the thumb pulling back the hammer spur in a single sweep.

SHOTS roared, several of them, apparently all together, for the explosions joined in a mad medley of sound, echoes banging from the cliffs. Red Yager uttered a sharp cry of pain, and his stubby arm never rose to proper killing height. His red-haired hand, holding his Colt, went limp as the weight of the weapon pulled it down. The outlaw chief's slug drilled between the widespread black boots of the Masked Rider, and spanged into the ground.

Red Yager was in a gun crouch, leaning slightly forward, a strange rasp issued from his writhing lips. He began to shiver, then his knees buckled and he did a bizarre dance of death before he fell on his side, the life blood gushing from his lungs.

The Masked Rider's first shot had touched Red's heart, a mortal wound.

But the masked avenger knew that the fight was just beginning. Yager had hoped he would ride into the cleverly prepared trap, and had been sure he would never leave it alive, if he proved recalcitrant.

The Masked Rider was within six feet of the bandits who had come with Red Yager. They were all diving for their pistols. The Masked Rider had only enough time to put a hurried bullet into the head of the nearest one to prevent the outlaw from shooting point-blank into his ear.

It was action too fast for breath. Cool, coordinating muscles and brain were vital in such a fight.

As the Masked Rider dropped to his knee, a bullet bit a chunk out of his black sombrero. Another of the quick-draw artists crashed backward. An instant later, one more leaped up and screamed, dropping his revolver and clutching his shattered hip. The Masked Rider leaped aside, for lead from the others was coming too close for comfort. And as he fired again, still another fighting bandit was put out of action.

Screeching profanity, one more outlaw crouched in the shelter of a big rock. The Masked Rider's slug only kicked shale into the man's eyes. But the lantern light glinted on a steady gun barrel taking aim, as the Masked Rider swung and pounded away.

The last of Yager's picked band, hugging the stone, folded up, groveling in the dirt. And from up on the steep slope opposite Ruby Cliff still glinted the flashing rifle which had so abetted the Masked Rider in his triumphant battle.

"Good old Blue Hawk!" the Masked Rider muttered.

The Masked Rider had known what he was doing when he had checked that slope that afternoon. And Blue Hawk had been stationed up there, well hidden, before the man in the black mask had ridden into the narrows.

At the base of Ruby Cliff, in the flickering lanternlight, lay the dead bandit chieftain and his half dozen killers. Low moans from a wounded man rose in the air, and a bloody haze seemed to accentuate the color of the rock.

"Ain't out of it yet!" grunted the Masked Rider, running with gun in hand.

For shouts had sounded from both ends of the trail. As the Masked Rider had guessed, Yager had split his gang and hidden the two bands at either end of the trail, to cut off escape. It was a tight trap. Only a much cleverer mind than the one that had plotted it could have countered

it at every point.

The Masked Rider could see the outlaws racing in, guns glinting. Bullets began seeking him as his moving, elusive figure was spotted. The gang on his right had reached the black mustang, and viciously they poured slugs into the animal, taking no chances. The black collapsed in its tracks and quivered, dead before it landed.

"We got him—shoot the dog!" a big bandit bellowed.

THE Masked Rider was firing as he ran. He had but a few yards to go to reach the narrow gully that cut up through the steep slope opposite Ruby Cliff—and he made it. Blue Hawk caught the killers against the lantern glow, and his steady rifle picked them off as they dared approach the spot where they might get a clear bead on the Masked Rider.

Appalled by the slaughter and the smart plays the Masked Rider made, catching them by surprise, they were forced to pause. Blue Hawk's steady *zip-zip* of rifle slugs broke up the groups. Their shots were going wild, and the Masked Rider kept low, protected by the gully walls. He mounted swiftly toward the Yaqui's position. None could get near the narrow opening of the gully. It was not shown up in the lanternlight and Blue Hawk kept it clean of killers.

"Hey—he's killed Red!" one of them shrieked.

The Masked Rider, panting, made the hard climb like a big spider going over a sand heap. Then he had reached the level where Blue Hawk was crouched in his hole. The Yaqui, with a parting shot, joined him and the two slid over the top of the purple ridge and out of range of the infuriated outlaws.

"I—got Yager!" the Masked Rider said breathlessly.

"Ugh! Good work."

"They meant to strike Harrison's tonight. This'll put a crimp into their plans. I was right, Blue Hawk. Blackie Salem had tied up with Yager. They're after the land so's they can sell it to the rushers."

Down on the other side of the ridge waited their horses, Midnight, the handsome black stallion, the pinto, and Blue Hawk's wiry gray.

"Sorry that Star H mustang I borrered was killed," muttered the Masked Rider. "But I didn't dare take Midnight into that trap."

He had plenty to think about. With only Blue Hawk to help, he had to finish off Blackie Salem and his crew, and Yager's men would now be thirsting even more than ever for his blood. He had killed their leader, and such men would want revenge.

CHAPTER X

Pressure

AFTER Wayne Morgan had left him, Val Harrison made plans for guarding the Star H.

He whistled as he went about his work that day. Every so often he had to go in and kiss Louise, for his love for the girl seemed increasing hourly. She alone could comfort him, since the death of his father, could take the sting out of the shock he had undergone.

"I jest can't believe she's mine," he murmured over and over.

The hours sped swiftly, with Louise near. She was interested in the ranch, and walked around with him as he proudly displayed his blooded Arab strain horses, used for improving the mustang breeds, and his prize cattle. She had been with the traveling tent show as long as she could remember, forced to the life by Blackie Salem who claimed she was his niece, but always she had yearned for a real home.

Louise and Val were out of the

ranchhouse most of the day, finally returning when Val's Aunt Sophy called them to supper. Aunt Sophy, a kindly, middle-aged woman, the only sister of Val's father, had taken Louise under her wing wholeheartedly.

After dark, Harrison put one of his men out to ride the circle of the ranch buildings, to keep a sharp eye peeled for any signs of attack.

Around ten o'clock, Val sat with Louise and his aunt in the brightly lighted, spacious living room, talking of their wedding and future plans.

"I'm shore happy," Val cried. "Louise, yuh make the whole world look good! I just know—"

What else he would have said was cut off as a quick double whistle sounded. Val Harrison jumped up, grabbed his gun-belt and strapped it on as he hurried out to the veranda. His patrol, Billy Devlin, rode up, pulling his horse to a sliding stop.

"Hey, Val," Devlin sang out, "yuh got a caller. It's Blackie Salem, that slick medicine show man."

Harrison frowned. "Is he alone?"

"Yeah. I stopped him at the gates."

"What's he want?"

"Just a word with yuh, he says. He claims he don't mean no harm."

"All right. Let him ride up, but keep to his saddle. I don't want any truck with him."

Devlin spurred back down the long lane to the main gates, and after a time Blackie Salem cantered in, riding a dark chestnut stallion.

"Good evening, Harrison," Salem called coolly.

"Well," growled Val, "yuh got yore nerve with yuh, ridin' up to my door, Salem. What yuh got to say?"

"Just this, my young friend. You've run off with my ward and niece. I could have the law on you for that."

Harrison laughed. "Well, I'll be danged! If the law ever hears of the way yuh've treated her, Salem, they'll skin yuh alive! We don't cotton to skunks like you in these parts. Now if yuh got nothin' else to say, sashay. Louise is marryin' me next week, savvy?"

"I'll give my consent, and five thousand dollars for the Star H," Salem said quietly.

"I don't need yore consent and wouldn't sell to yuh for any price! Now get! Yuh're a murderin' polecat."

"That's your last word?"

"Final."

BLACKIE SALEM swung his horse and galloped away.

Harrison went back inside. Louise's face was pale and she trembled as she put her hand on Val's.

"I—I heard what he said, Val. I've brought you danger and trouble. Maybe it would be best if I went back to the show."

"Don't talk thataway—please!"

She shook her head. "I love you, Val. That's why I can't bear to cause you such worry. You don't know Blackie as I do. He's ruthless. He'll be back."

"We're all ready for him," Val Harrison promised grimly.

That night he slept with one eye open, and without removing pants and shirt. Now and then he heard Devlin's quiet, slow patrol as the cowboy rode past his open window. Louise was sleeping on the other side of the big house, next his aunt's room.

A half moon had risen, to join the stars, and gave a faint light to the cool Arizona world. The night sounds of horses and cattle came to him, but did not disturb him any more than did the piping of frogs. They were as familiar to him as the aromatic breeze.

Val Harrison's one big thought was how best to protect Louise. He decided that in the morning he would send for the county sheriff, whose offices were a hundred miles away to the east of the Purple Ridges, and de-

mand that Salem be arrested. No doubt the sheriff already had heard of Red Yager's raids and probably had begun to collect a big posse to scour the hills for the outlaws.

"He'll have his hands full, but he's got to help me out, too," thought Harrison.

He picked up his big watch, a gold turnip affair which had belonged to his father. By turning it to the moon shaft from the window, he could see that it was twenty-five minutes after one. And it was at that exact minute that a quick succession of roaring gunshots burst out.

"Watch it, Star H!" he heard Devlin yell. "Here they come!"

Leaping from his bed, Harrison snatched up his double-barreled shotgun and some shells ready at hand, and ran into the front room in his bare feet. The big yard was in an uproar, and through the window Harrison saw death flaming from many guns.

Dark figures of horsemen sped toward the house.

The two other men that Val Harrison had besides Devlin had bunked in the kitchen lean-to for the night. They came rushing to join him, weapons in hand.

"Cover Billy Devlin!" Val cried, taking a stand at the front window on the right.

Devlin was fleeing for shelter ahead of a large band of men. But evidently his horse had been hit, for suddenly the mustang staggered and went down. Devlin jumped, but the attackers swept up on him, pouring bullets into him from close quarters in spite of the covering fire from inside the house. Harrison picked off one attacker, and another crashed from his cowboys' bullets. Then the gang broke up and swept into a wide circle, yelling and shooting in.

"It's Red Yager's bunch!" called Fred Blenheim, one of Val's waddies. "I don't see Yager, though."

NOR could Harrison. They seemed to be led by a tall, dark figure, in a black cape. The man's face was a black blob in the faint moonshine, masked. He kept well back, out of range.

"Mebbe that's the Masked Rider," Val thought, then shook his head. From what he had heard, the Masked Rider had opposed these bandits.

Slugs were biting chunks of wood from the window and door frames, and the hullabaloo rose to the sky. Behind Val and his men a woman's voice cried out, then his aunt emerged from her room, with a lighted candle-lantern in one hand and a six-shooter in the other.

"Douse that light, Aunt Sophy!" shouted Harrison. "See if Louise is all right! Watch out for her while we fight."

His aunt blew out the candle, and stepped to Louise's closed door. In a moment she came hurrying to Harrison.

"Louise's door's bolted!" she cried. "I can't make her hear me!"

A .45 bullet whipped inches over them. Harrison started for Louise's room, keeping down low to dodge the bullets whirling through the windows.

His two men had taken the sides of the big house, but there was a lot to cover. Blenheim was at the back corner, nearest Louise's room. He was reloading his guns, squatted on the floor by the window. Crashing explosions outside and tearing lead thick as flies kept him down. He cursed as a splinter cut his cheek, the blood spurting.

"They're mighty hot here, Val!" he gasped. "I can't get up to make a shot!"

Harrison was banging on the girl's door.

"Louise—open the door! Come out! Bandits are attackin'."

There was no reply. Val put his big shoulder to the wooden panel.

With a mighty heave he burst the bolt inside from its moorings and crashed through.

"Louise!" he shouted.

Cold wind hit him full in the face, from the wide open window. In the dim light he saw at a glance that the bed and room were empty. She was gone!

Stricken with horror, throat drying with alarm, Val Harrison lost his head and rushed to the open window. He saw gunmen right outside, but did not see that they had Louise. As they sighted him framed in the rectangle, moonlight glinted on their rising guns.

In fury Harrison poured bullets into them. Curses and shots answered him, and they could not miss.

He felt the terrific shock of striking, heavy bullets and was whirled around by the impact as he fell to the floor. . . .

CHAPTER XI

The Rush

PAINSTAKINGLY detouring through dense chaparral and around steep, razorback red ridges, the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk got back on the valley road. They rested for a time beside a deep pool gouged from the rock by the force of a sixty-foot waterfall where a mountain rill fell to the lower reaches of the land.

Here they could drink and water their four animals, and bathe the wounds they had taken in the swift, hot fight against overwhelming odds. Blue Hawk had been cut by flying splinters of redstone and lead when the gang had peppered his eyrie during his coverage of the Masked Rider's escape. The masked man himself had felt the burn of several slugs at close quarters and had been bruised in his run up the cliff.

"We better hustle for the Star H, Blue Hawk," the Masked Rider said, when he was ready to mount Midnight. "They might not attack that ranch tonight, with Red gone, but I want to make shore."

It was nearly two A.M. when the two riders heard gunfire. It came from the Star H and, as they galloped up, the smashing of the firearms grew louder.

"That's Yager's bunch, shore as guns shoot!" exclaimed the Masked Rider, checking his own gun with his supple fingers. "I'm goin' to bust it up, Blue Hawk!"

"*Si* . . . Senor, they do not quit!"

Shotguns, rifles and pistols roared. Men were firing from the windows, while about the ranchhouse rode the ravening Yager outlaws, sending torrents of lead into the place.

Low over his great black horse, the Masked Rider unhesitatingly locked horns with the bandit crew. He charged in at them, both Colts going full-blast, and guiding Midnight with knee pressure. His deadly weapons picked two outlaws off their mustangs before they realized he raged in on them, his gun blazing, bullets singing.

"The Masked Rider!" came hoarse shouts.

Blue Hawk, back in the dark near the fence, was shooting at the bandit line with his Winchester.

It was much like the fight at the B-in-a-Box, save that Red Yager no longer led the outlaws. And then it was that the Masked Rider glimpsed a sinister masked figure in a black cape much like his own, well off to the left, out of harm's way.

This time, however, the outlaws made little resistance when they found the Masked Rider upon them. They shot back at him, but quickly retreated, heading off for the wild country, with their new chief in the van. Never letting up in his fire, the Masked Rider drove them from the

ranch of his friend.

Swinging a wide circle, the Masked Rider rejoined Blue Hawk.

"I've got to be Wayne Morgan here," he told the Yaqui. "I'll take yore hoss, Blue Hawk. Watch out for Midnight and my outfit."

Swiftly he removed the black cape, the mask, gloves and hat. Beneath that garb was the clothing of the wandering waddy Val Harrison knew.

Riding in, bareheaded and breathing hard, he sang out to the men in the house.

"Where's Val?" he cried. "I'm Wayne Morgan! Heard there was an attack on the ranch and hustled over to get in the scrap."

"Yuh're too late, waddy," growled Blenheim, as he opened the ranch-house door for Morgan. He was mopping blood from his face as it slowly ran down from a clipped scalp. "The fight's done finished. The Masked Rider come along and chased them skunks into the chaparral. Yuh see anything of him?"

"I reckon that was him went by me like blazes. Where's Val?"

"In there." Blenheim pointed.

MORGAN strode over to a bedroom where a lamp was burning. Val's Aunt Sophy was sitting on the edge of a narrow cot, a basin of water and a blood-stained cloth in her hand as she tended Harrison who lay stretched on the bed.

"He's still unconscious," Aunt Sophy told Morgan. "The poor boy's badly hit."

Morgan swore inwardly as he stepped over and saw to what extent Val had been wounded. The blood came from a furrow in his scalp, a bullet path cut through his coppery hair, some of which his aunt had scissored off.

"That wound's not serious," she told Morgan. "But he's got one in the left thigh, too, and I'm afraid his leg's broken."

"Where's Louise?" demanded Morgan.

The sadness deepened in the woman's face. "When the attack started she was in her bedroom over there, asleep. But when Val broke in the door she was gone. I guess those horrible bandits carried her away with them."

Fury smote Morgan. His teeth gritted and his nails dug into his calloused palms.

"Be back later," he said thickly.

He crossed to the room Aunt Sophy had pointed out as Louise's. At once it was plain that the girl had been spirited through the window. He took a lighted candle in his hand and leaned out the window. In the soft, sandy dirt he made out a footprint—not a boot impression, but a long, oval mark.

"Moccasin," he muttered.

When he went back to the living room Blenheim and the other cowboy were busy treating their wounds. They hardly glanced at Morgan as he left by the front door.

Mounting, he rode to where Blue Hawk waited for him.

"Blue Hawk!" he exclaimed. "Them skunks carried off Louise Allen, Val's girl. Go round to the north side of the house, savvy, and yuh'll see a candle-lit room, the third winder from the porch. I left the light there. I'll see nobody bothers yuh while yuh check up."

"Si."

The Yaqui started running, swiftly and silently, to obey.

Wayne Morgan returned to the living-room. Blenheim had brought a bottle of whisky in from the kitchen and was sharing it with his waddy mate.

"Thanks, don't mind if I do."

Morgan took a drink, and began questioning them about the night attack. He kept the two cowboys occupied with excited conversation until presently he heard a faint, seemingly far-off cry, the wail of a mountain lion.

Blue Hawk's signal. He left the cowboys then, with an excuse of seeing to his horse, and hurried to join the Yaqui.

"Apache," grunted Blue Hawk as Morgan reached him. His dark eyes glinting as he watched tall waddy's grim face. "Sneak in like shadow, gag her, carry her out, make no noise, savvy?"

"I savvy! That sidewinder, Cromo!" He thought for a moment, then said, "It's up to you, Blue Hawk. Can yuh trail that Apache devil?"

Blue Hawk clucked in his throat, always a sign he was pleased. His brown, lean hand patted the long knife in his crimson sash.

"Yaqui against Apache," he murmured. "Is good."

"Stay on the trail and don't rest till yuh come up with Cromo. He's Blackie Salem's ace."

HE gave Blue Hawk quick word pictures of the girl, the Apache, Salem and Buff Burton.

"I'll likely need Midnight," continued Morgan, "so I'll keep him, Blue Hawk. I can pick up a bronc here to ride around in the open."

"Bueno."

Blue Hawk touched his friend's hand, mounted and rode off into the darkness.

When Morgan returned to the ranchhouse, he found Val Harrison breathing more easily, but still unconscious.

"I reckon Saddleville's the next stop for me," mused Morgan.

Cromo might possibly take Louise Allen back to the tent show. Also, Morgan had a whole skeleton of bones to pick with Blackie Salem. It was time to crush the showman and his evil crew.

"Arizona ain't safe," he muttered, "till Salem's cooked."

It was afternoon when Wayne Morgan reached Saddleville and the town hummed with activity.

On his way, Morgan had passed numerous riders, men with intent, serious faces and gleaming eyes, hurrying into the Purple Ridges. Some led pack horses laden with miner's tools, short-handled picks and shovels, washing pans, and grub.

A crowd was around Blackie Salem's tent show. Salem was in the big tent, but no performance was going on. Instead, Blackie sat behind a box table, pen and ink and papers at hand. He was selling claims, mining claims, chunks of land from the Circle Two Ranch where Red Yager's gang had struck so savagely and successfully, killing the owner and breaking up that happy family. The widow had optioned her property to Salem, and he was disposing of it to eager buyers.

Wayne Morgan had ridden in on a borrowed Star H mustang. He had Midnight in a safe hiding-place, not far from the town, so that he could pick up his black and his Masked Rider outfit when he wanted it.

He edged into the tent, keeping to the rear. In a low voice he spoke to a man awaiting his turn to buy a claim.

"What's the rush for, hombre?"

"Huh? Why, heck, stranger, they've found rough diamonds in the Purple Ridges! A couple of waddies picked up a bunch, and yestidday more was discovered on the Circle Two range. Claims are risin' in price every hour and I aim to be in on the start."

Morgan filtered out, suspicion rising, and snooped about the wagons and smaller tents. He could find no signs of Cromo or of Louise Allen. Evidently she had not been brought to Saddleville.

"Well," a harsh voice snarled, "what yuh want, waddy?"

He swung quickly. The ugly giant of the shaven pate, Buff Burton, was glaring at him.

"Why, howdy, Buff," Morgan said pleasantly.

Warily he eyed the big fellow. Burton's muscles bulged with might. In

his grip almost any man would be helpless, once Buff got his hold.

"What yuh snoopin' round here for?" demanded Burton, his small eyes narrowed.

Salem and Buff knew Morgan only as a friend of Harrison's. They could have no idea that this wandering cowhand was the great Masked Rider.

"I'm huntin' for a wuffletruffle, Buff," Morgan said solemnly.

"Huh?" The giant stared stupidly.

WAYNE MORGAN realized the terrible peril confronting Louise Allen, held some place by the murderous Cromo. If Salem decided it was necessary, to protect himself, he would order Cromo to kill her.

"Oh, Buff!" That was Blackie Salem, calling his man.

The show owner appeared at the back flap of the main tent. When he saw Wayne Morgan he scowled, and came strolling over, a burning West Indian cheroot clenched in his teeth.

"Well, what's up, Morgan?" he demanded.

Morgan had to think fast.

"Harrison sent me, Salem," he told the showman. "Says he wants to talk business with yuh."

Salem's eyes gleamed.

"All right," he said, "I'll ride over later on. I meant to call on him anyway."

Wayne Morgan nodded, swung, and went over to the saloon.

"At least I know where Blackie'll be this evenin'!" he thought.

From the saloon windows he watched the bustling town as the evening shadows purpled the ridges. The place was crowded with rushers seeking claims and grubstakes, outfits to start prospecting.

"If Salem had the Star H now," thought Morgan, "he'd clean up a million on it! It's right in the heart of it all. He got the Circle Two. That was lucky for him—or was it?"

Night fell. Morgan had some ham and eggs and coffee, thinking, as he ate, that a big showdown was rapidly approaching. More and more he felt that there still was something about the whole affair on which he had not yet put his finger, but what it was he could not guess.

Still he saw no signs of Cromo or Louise.

"Salem savvies how Val loves her," he thought, "and likely is holdin' her hostage. And a hundred-to-one Val'll trade his ranch for her."

He kept an eye on all the men who entered the saloon, but his interest was not claimed until, after dark, a slight fellow came in and shoved up to the bar for a drink. Chicago Elms had come back in town.

The ferret-faced little man looked grim. His washed-out eyes flitted back and forth as he slammed money on the bar and demanded whisky. He consumed several glasses, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, set his shoulders determinedly, and stalked out.

"Now what's he after?" wondered Morgan as he watched Elms go straight over to the plaza and disappear in Blackie Salem's tent. "This is gettin' interestin'." Leaving the saloon himself, Morgan took a roundabout way to the tent show in the plaza.

Buff Burton slouched at the front of Salem's living quarters, but Wayne Morgan managed to get near enough, in the rear, to overhear what Salem and Elms were saying. It was some minutes before he had crept within earshot, though, using the shadows cast by wagons and poles.

"Shucks," Chicago Elms was saying in his high-pitched voice, "I lost that stake you gave me in Tombstone right off the bat. I want more, Blackie. In fact, I want half."

"I see," Salem said easily. "So, you heard about it. You always were a quick one, Chicago."

"No use trying to pull the wool over

my eyes, Salem, flatterin' me that way," growled Elms. "I want my cut, and if I don't get it I'll tell everything. You spread word the Masked Rider robbed me of 'em, but now I know you did it. You've got a good racket and I want in."

"Blackmail," thought Morgan, ears wide open, as he lay pressed flat in the warm dirt behind the tent.

NOW, with suspicions running riot in his mind, he was seeking to join all the clues he had run upon into a clear-cut picture. He decided to do some further checking on Chicago Elms.

"Don't worry, Chicago," Salem was assuring the little man. "You're in. There's plenty for us all. Tonight I'm on my way to the Star H, where the first strike was made. We've got to sew it up tonight—now—because the cowboys who picked up those diamonds have already let the cat out of the bag."

"I'll go with you," said Elms.

"Just what I was goin' to suggest," Blackie replied. "Have a drink." He sang out: "Oh, Buff!" and as Burton waddled into the tent, he said: "We'll be ridin' for the Star H in an hour, Buff. Have our three fastest horses saddled and ready. Well, hurry up and see to it."

Morgan backed off, and hurried away. At the telegraph office he sent a wire to Somers Brothers—the name he recalled from the letter that had been in Chicago Elm's pocket when the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk had found him unconscious on the trail—in care of the Chief of Police, Chicago. When the operator had sent the message, Morgan waited around for the reply, smoking. It was nearly an hour before it came, and he read it quickly. His face slowly cleared as he took in the startling information he had obtained.

"I'll have to trail 'em to the Star H," he was thinking, as he hurried away.

CHAPTER XII

The Night Trail

LOW on the jagged-edged horizon, the moon peeked through one of the narrow passes between the Purple Ridges. Stars were milky overhead, and a gentle wind stirred the dry pods of mesquite and rustled the chaparral.

Blackie Salem was riding through that night, with the heavy Buff Burton on his right, and the slight Chicago Elms, never a good horseman, on his left.

"Hey, how far we got to go, Blackie?" complained Elms. "My teeth are jolted out now. I got a headache."

"I reckon you had too much to drink," Salem remarked suavely, "before you came to shake me down, Chicago."

"Well, I don't feel it now. I'm cold as ice." Elms shivered and his teeth chattered. "I believe I'll drop out and you can pick me up on your way back, Blackie."

Chicago Elms, an experienced thief, did not like the tone that had come into Salem's voice. Nor did he fancy the dark shadows, the up-and-down wilds through which Salem had insisted on shortcutting.

"I believe you better stick with us," Salem said mockingly.

"Aw now, Blackie! You ain't sore at me, are you? After all, I got it comin' to me."

"Yes," Salem agreed frigidly, "you got it coming, Elms."

They had all stopped by now, and beside Elms was the powerful Burton, while Blackie Salem loomed ahead, blocking off any wild attempt the small fellow might make to spur off and run for it. Chicago Elms understood now. Salem was going to kill him. His breath hissed in and

out as he strove desperately to plead with his erstwhile partner in crime to spare him.

"Why, we been friends for ten years, Blackie! Remember how I staked you that time in Omaha? I don't hold any hard feelin's for what you done to me, do I? Fact is I'll take whatever you want to give me and blow. Grubstake me and I'll leave and never—"

"Dry up," snapped Salem. "He's yours, Buff."

Chicago Elms was almost fainting with terror. Death was upon him and he did not want to die.

"N-o-o, please, Blackie!" he chattered. But Buff Burton seized the small man, easily holding him, despite all Elms' struggles.

Blackie Salem swung his big horse. "I'll have to hustle, Buff. Don't make too much noise about it, there's a camp full of rushers over on the next slope."

"Okay, Boss," Buff Burton said carelessly.

He shook Elms until the small man's teeth rattled, then helpless in the giant's grip, Chicago Elms slid from his saddle, while Burton dismounted, throttling him.

"Don't — don't kill me, Buff," pleaded Elms, with his last gasp of breath. "I—"

"I always do what the boss tells me," growled Burton. "You fool, yuh shouldn'ta tried to shake him down!"

Burton threw Elms to earth and fell on him. The weight of the big fellow knocked the remaining breath from Chicago, and pain racked his body. The world swam before his dimming eyes as the terrible fingers vised on his throat, crushing the cartilage.

Buff Burton was taking such pleasure in making his kill that he failed to see the tall, black-clad figure that loomed suddenly against the patch of moon sky, coming silently along the trail.

THE Masked Rider, having shifted to his mystery garb, had taken up the scent, following the trio at a safe distance. When they had stopped, he had slid off Midnight and crept up, in time to hear Chicago Elms' frantic pleas for mercy.

"Here's my chance," he thought, as he stole in.

Salem was not far away yet. On the ground, in the patch lit by moon and stars, knelt the tremendous Burton, finishing off Chicago Elms. The Masked Rider got around to the back of the giant for he knew the man's lion strength. Drawing a six-shooter, he made a sudden rush that took him within a yard before the slow-moving Burton realized anyone was near.

Buff Burton wore no hat, so his shaved head was unprotected. The Masked Rider made no sound as he struck at once, his Colt barrel landing square on Burton's skull. The steel connected with a sharp crack. An ordinary man would have keeled over instantly. But Buff Burton was no ordinary man. He had the strength of three. All he did was let go of Chicago Elms and turn with a snarl of fury. A shot, the Masked Rider knew, would bring back Salem. He slashed out with the gun-sight as Burton reached for him. The giant's left eye was cut and closed, but he got his hand on the Masked Rider's wrist and jerked him in, seeking to squeeze him to death.

Never had the Masked Rider been in greater danger of death. If Burton once got that grizzly bear grip, he would never let go until his foe was senseless. And the pistol was off line as Burton pivoted, feet solid on the earth.

The Masked Rider, however, was a master at wrestling. He let go suddenly, traveling along with Burton's yank, and shoved his leg behind Burton. The big man tripped, and the Masked Rider went sailing on over his head, brought up short as Burton

still held his hand. He was slammed violently to earth as the strong man gripped him, but managed to hit Burton's knuckles with his revolver barrel, smashing them hard. The giant had to let go. For a moment the Masked Rider was free.

He crouched there, gun cocked and covering Burton.

"I'll shoot if yuh move, Buff!" he snarled.

But Burton was coming on. In the silvery moonlight he looked like some huge animal. He was cursing the Masked Rider, and red fire darted from his little eyes. He would not quit, even under the gun, but lunged straight at his enemy, maddened by the clever parrying of the man in black.

Though the Masked Rider knew that in all probability it would bring Salem back, which would spoil his game, he was forced to shoot. As Burton jumped him, and the Masked Rider was crowded back, he rammed the Colt muzzle into Burton's belly and raised his thumb off the hammer spur.

The big fellow's clothing and stomach muscles muffled the report. Exploding powder burned the Masked Rider's hand. He felt Burton's enormous weight falling on him, crushing him, and Burton's terrible great hands gripped him. Those fingers had him at last, and he could only struggle ineffectually, as Burton ripped at his throat.

The gun had been torn from his burning, numb fingers. The Masked Rider, with so many narrow escapes to his credit, had never been so close to the end. He was fighting to the last, seeking to ease Buff's hold, but the precious seconds that flew by, without air pumping into his bursting lungs, only made him weaker. His eyes bulged, and he knew that blackness was but instants away.

As the world danced before his vision, the Masked Rider steeled himself for the end. . . .

Suddenly the Masked Rider drew in a gasp of life-giving, priceless air. He was able to strain once more against the overwhelming fate which had claimed him. Then the vise shut again on his windpipe.

His shirt front was soaking wet. Buff Burton was pressed close over him, and his breath came in terrific heaves.

JUST as the Masked Rider thought he could fight no longer, Burton's fingers a second time relaxed and the man in the mask, pinned beneath him by the trained wrestler and his enormous weight, breathed another time. Hope came back to the Masked Rider. He steeled his soul, tensing to hold off the force of his deadly enemy.

The third brief spell came sooner than had the second, and the ensuing throttling did not last as long. The Masked Rider felt a fierce joy. Buff Burton was weakening!

And, just as swiftly as he had been pinned, so was he released when Buff Burton lost all power in his limbs, shook his head groggily, grunted and rolled over.

Painfully the Masked Rider dragged himself out from under the giant. He drew a gun, watching carefully as he regained his wind, and pulled himself together. But Burton never moved. After a time, the man in black, whose shirt front now was red with Burton's blood, knelt beside the giant and checked. There was no heartbeat. Buff Burton was dead.

"My bullet hit him right," muttered the Masked Rider, "but it took time to kill him."

His .45-caliber slug had lodged by Burton's heart. Most men would have died instantly. But the strong man had kept going for moments that had nearly cost the Masked Rider his life.

Finding a canteen hanging from Burton's saddle, the Masked Rider took a drink. He bathed his burning

face, felt of his torn, bruised throat. He was aching from the beating Buff had given him but he was all in one piece and had no serious injury.

"Quit! Please don't! Cut it out, Buff—"

The Masked Rider swung quickly. He had forgotten Elms, occupied in his struggle with Burton. Those moments had been breaths of eternity, dragging out in his mind to interminable periods.

In his mask and cape, he knelt by Chicago Elms, and trickled water between the little man's teeth. Soon Elms awoke, and stared fearfully up at the masked face.

"Hey!" he whispered. "Who—who are you?"

"The Masked Rider."

"Where's that big murderer?"

"Him and me had a little tussle. He's dead."

"I don't believe it!" exclaimed Elms incredulously.

"If yuh don't, go take a look at him."

ELMS got up and staggered over. Burton was dead all right.

"Well, dang it, outlaw, you sure done a good job! He's cooked, curse him! I never thought one man could finish that walkin' mastodon." Chicago Elms was well pleased. "I'm in the same line as you, Masked Rider," he hurried on. "I thought it was you who held me up on the road to Saddleville one night, but I know now it was Blackie Salem and his lobos."

Elms offered the makings and they smoked.

"I'll get square with Salem if it's the last thing I do," promised Chicago. "He told Buff to kill me, and I'd be finished now if it wasn't for you."

"S'pose yuh tell me the whole tale, Elms," said the Masked Rider softly. "From the time yuh left Chicago, with the police at yore heels. Marie'll be glad yuh ain't killed."

Elms started violently, licked his thin lips. His scared eyes sought the slitted holes of the domino mask, trying to read how much the Masked Rider knew. To cinch it, the Masked Rider drawled:

"I got a wire in my pocket from Somers Brothers, Chicago. Now I savvy the whole game. Yuh might as well help me."

The little man gulped, but then he began to talk.

"Why don't we throw in together?" he asked eagerly, when he had finished his tale.

"A good idea," said the Masked Rider. "Anyhow for awhile, till this is over. I won't hurt yuh, Elms, so don't get excited. But I need yuh, and I don't want to lose yuh. I'm tyin' yuh up."

"Aw, please, Masked Rider!" whimpered Elms. "Lemme go."

"Later, if yuh help me and behave."

He trussed Elms and tied him to a horse. Then he changed to a fresh shirt he had in Midnight's saddle-bag and, adjusting his guns and mounting Midnight, he rode after Salem, leading Chicago's mustang.

They had ridden but three miles when Midnight sniffed, rippled his hide. He had smelled other horses, up ahead. Tying Elms' horse to a tree, the Masked Rider left him there, gagged and bound, unable to escape.

The Masked Rider proceeded cautiously, ever alert. Soon he heard the thud of many hoofs and drew Midnight off the trail, concealing himself. He could look down and see a moonlit patch of trail. On it appeared a big man in a black cape, with a mask over his face. Masked outlaws, unquestionably Red Yager's gang, followed him. The Masked Rider heard Blackie Salem's voice, giving final orders.

"I'll go in first, boys. If he won't sign up we'll make it final tonight. This is our last chance to take the

Star H; it's worth a fortune and we'll clean up in the next few days if we get it now. I believe Harrison'll give up to me when I talk to him. If not, we burn him out and kill 'em all."

The show owner had taken over leadership of what remained of Yager's crew. He was the man in the black cape, so much like the Masked Rider's own!

CHAPTER XIII

Bargain

INSTEAD of following the outlaws directly, the Masked Rider went back and picked up Elms, and headed for an adjoining ridge. A campfire burned up there, in a camp of rushers who were seeking diamonds in the Purple Ridges.

It was not far, and soon the Masked Rider rode in, rousing the burly citizens who were sleeping, wrapped in their blankets. There were two score of them and they stared curiously at the Masked Rider. Some were alarmed, but the Masked Rider soon put them at ease.

In a few quick words he told them startling facts he had learned.

"Ain't got time for it all, now, gents," he said. "Give it to yuh later. I want yuh to do what I say, and take charge of this prisoner, Chicago Elms."

"We're with yuh, Masked Rider," the man who apparently was their leader growled.

With a few final words of instruction, the Masked Rider started the black stallion for the Star H, his plans all set.

He did not approach the Star H directly, but dismounted well out from the buildings and started to flit in, keeping to the dark spots. Lights shone in the living room, and a saddled horse stood at the hitch-rack. On the porch, alert, a shotgun in his hands, stood the waddy, Fred Blenheim.

The Masked Rider eased up the window of the room from which Louise had been snatched by the villainous Cromo, and got inside. Tiptoeing to the door, he heard the voices of Blackie Salem and Val Harrison. When he peeked through a crack of the door he saw Harrison, his leg in a splint, lying on a sofa, while Salem stood near, talking coolly.

"Yes, I've got Louise, and in a safe place, too, Harrison," Salem informed the young rancher. "Cromo is taking care of her and she won't be found easily."

"Yuh're a dirty dog, Salem," growled Val.

"Let's skip all that, and get down to brass tacks," the showman said coldly. "I'll put my cards on the table. You want Louise, and I want the Star H, here and now. Sign over your spread to me and promise not to make me any future trouble, and you can have her."

"We'll find her ourselves! Morgan's lookin' for her."

"It'll be too bad for her if he does find her. Cromo has orders not to let her be taken alive."

"Yuh wouldn't do such a thing!"

Blackie shrugged. He was playing for high stakes and he meant to win.

"Cromo has no heart at all, Harrison."

"S'pose I won't give yuh the ranch?"

"Then you'll never see your sweetheart again, I swear it."

Harrison's face was chalky under his tan. His wound was hurting, and the mental anguish was terrific.

"If I sign over the ranch," he growled, "yuh'll let Louise go free, not harm her?"

"That's it in a nutshell," Blackie agreed pleasantly.

"All right, then. I'll do it."

"I have the proper legal forms right with me," Salem said, taking them

from his inside coat pocket.

Val Harrison was not the only one suffering. The Masked Rider, too, was in agony.

"If I go after Blackie, that develish Apache'll slit the girl's throat shore!" he thought. "But—I just can't let Salem win!"

PAINFULLY Val Harrison turned on his side, and took the inked pen which Blackie Salem handed him. He was giving up his patrimony to save Louise Allen, have her restored to him.

"Yuh'll swear to let her go, Salem, if I do this?"

"Yeah, as soon as all's settled and I've left here."

Blackie had everything his own way.

The Masked Rider pulled open the bedroom door and stepped into the lighted main room.

"Hold it, Harrison!" he ordered in a voice vastly different from that of Wayne Morgan. "Salem, yuh can't get away with this—not while I'm alive and kickin'."

Blackie Salem's quick eyes darted over the dread figure in the black cape, black Stetson, and black domino mask. He feared the Masked Rider, and had no idea that the Robin Hood outlaw was so close on his trail. Heavy guns showed at the Masked Rider's waist, guns that were known to be swift in dealing out retribution.

Salem made no attempt to draw a pistol, but quickly stepped to the other side of the sofa so that Harrison lay between the Masked Rider and the showman.

Then Blackie remembered he held the trump card.

"Harrison," he growled, "if this outlaw touches me, Cromo'll finish Louise."

Val Harrison's pain-racked eyes sought the slits in the domino mask, searching for guidance.

"I know yuh'd like to help me, Masked Rider," he said, "but—I'd ruther be shore that girl I love is safe than to keep what property I own. Step away and let's get it over with."

"That's the sensible way to talk," crowed Blackie Salem, triumphant eyes as he mocked the Masked Rider.

Cool as he appeared outwardly, slouched against the wall, eager as he was to have it out with Blackie Salem in a duel to the death, the Masked Rider was boiling with rage. As long as Salem held Louise, he had them, and the Masked Rider knew it. Blackie could torture Harrison into anything, and the Masked Rider did not doubt that Salem would carry out his threats if he were balked.

Of course he might trail Salem after the man made his cleanup, and try to punish him. But there was always the chance that such an elusive criminal would shake him off.

And then, just as he felt defeated by the sinister and clever Salem, the Masked Rider's keen ears caught a far-off cry. It was like the wail of a mountain lion, and it was repeated in a peculiar fashion, three times ringing in the Purple Ridges.

"Blue Hawk!" thought the Masked Rider, and joy smote him.

He shifted and cried harshly:

"Throw up yore paws, Salem; yore time has come!"

"No!" gasped the wounded Harrison. "They'll kill Louise!"

Blackie Salem had been watching the Masked Rider closely. He sensed the sudden change in the dark-clad outlaw's demeanor, the quick brightening of the eyes behind the mask slits.

Salem dropped to one knee, whipping a heavy revolver from inside his black coat. Deliberately using the injured Harrison as a shield, his first shot cut a chunk from the flesh under the Masked Rider's left arm. It stung frightfully, and the shock so close to the heart sent a palpitation of pain through his whole system. His gun,

however, had beaten Blackie Salem's, as they had drawn together. He had been a shade ahead of the showman, but could only aim for Blackie's shoulder, sticking around the high end of Harrison's couch.

HE knew he had made a hit. Salem cursed, and his second bullet plugged into the wall a foot from the moving Masked Rider, trying to get around within clear shooting sight of his foe. Salem was hit, he was down out of sight. Harrison sought to reach for him but Blackie slashed at him with his pistol. An instant later Salem shot at the lamp on the table and the chimney smashed, flicking out the burning wick, plunging them into semi-darkness.

The Masked Rider sprang for the couch. A gun blazed almost in his face, but the bullet missed him by inches. He could hear Salem running ahead of him, but his searching slug did not bring Blackie down. Salem swung into a bedroom door, slammed it, and as the Masked Rider hit it with all his weight, the bolt was shot, holding against him for precious moments.

He drew back, and crashed the door in. A cold draught hit his face. Salem had dropped from the open window. The Masked Rider, Colt in hand, blood streaming down his ribs, stuck out his head and shoulders. Blackie was just disappearing around the back corner, and a shot whistled past the Masked Rider's nose.

His answer cut splinters from the spot where Salem had been a breath before. As he dived outside he heard the shrill whistling of the lean killer.

"Callin' that Yager gang in!" he muttered, dashing after Salem.

It was Blackie's saddled horse that was near at hand. The Masked Rider glimpsed him as he leaped on his mustang and spurred away, low over the animal.

The Masked Rider began whistling, and Midnight galloped up to him. Mounting and gripping the handsome black stallion's ribs with his powerful knees, he started on Blackie's trail.

CHAPTER XIV

Big Fight

BLACKIE SALEM did not ride far. A long line of armed riders, the Yager outlaws, burst from the woods and brush and came tearing full-tilt to meet their new leader.

"There he is!" Salem roared. "Don't let him get free this time, boys!"

They were coming in, formed in a half circle, cleverly spread out and placed. The Masked Rider realized he would be surrounded if he did not act quickly. He pulled Midnight around and, zigzagging, his guns barking at the spread-out gunmen, rode back and turned past the back of the rambling big ranchhouse. He had hardly passed the kitchen when he saw more masked bandits riding in from the opposite side. Blackie had the Star H surrounded! And this time the gunmen were riding far apart, in a determined line, sure of their revenge on the Masked Rider.

His pistols spat, and a man crashed off his horse, but a volley concentrated on him, touching his Stetson, and stinging Midnight. Blackie Salem was urging his other gang in and the Masked Rider was caught between the house and the low-flung stable.

To hesitate would have proved fatal. The stable door was open and he put Midnight to it, hugging the black's sleek neck as Midnight ran into the building. Leaping to the straw-covered floor, the Masked Rider slammed the oaken door and dropped the wooden bar.

A howl of triumph arose outside.

They were sure they had him now.

He sprang to a small window slit, gun ready. Slugs were spitting into the wood, some coming through in thin spots. He shot carefully, but with no waste of precious seconds, downing three of the outlaws as they massed on him.

"We'll smoke the skunk out!" shouted Salem furiously.

They started riding an Indian circle around the barn. Busy where he was, the Masked Rider was unable to get a bead on those at the blind back of the building.

He knew what they were up to—setting fire to bundles of straw to burn him out!

Steadily he held those in front at bay. Smoke began blowing through the cracks in the wooden walls, and the stock in the barn stamped and whinnied in fear. The Masked Rider's face was grimly set as he listened, seeking to hear more distant sounds over the roaring pistols and shotguns, the cursing of the killers.

He coughed, acrid smoke in his throat. The barn was filling with it, and when he glanced around he could see the flames licking at the dry boards.

At least he was keeping them busy, holding them off Val Harrison and the Star H. Then from the back of the ranchhouse a couple of men began shooting rifles, driving the bandits to cover.

"Mebbe I could make the kitchen door if I have to," the Masked Rider thought, for the smoke was growing unbearable.

Midnight was coughing, and dancing impatiently, while other horses in the stalls were jerking furiously at their halters.

There was an open space between the stable and the house, but there was small chance he could cross it without being shot down. Blackie Salem was thirsting for his blood, and so were the Yager outlaws whom he had bested.

"I'll have to chance it," he muttered.

He ran back, loosening the horses and was almost knocked over as they started out, wildly excited by the fire. Midnight protected him, staying close to him. The animals bunched at the main doors, and the Masked Rider mounted the black, and kicked the bar out. He meant to emerge in the rush of the mustangs.

A HOWL of fury rose in the smoky air.

"There he is—get him!" an outlaw shrieked.

"Watch out!" Blackie Salem called a sudden warning to his gunmen. "Who's that?"

The Masked Rider was shooting now, but they were swinging, to face a new peril. The Robin Hood outlaw felt deep satisfaction as he found his plan working perfectly.

Riders came sweeping in from all sides, forty or fifty of them, howling war-cries as they attacked. They had the outlaws caught in their ring, and shotguns and pistols spat at the masked bandits.

They were rushers, from that big camp at which the Masked Rider had called before coming to the Star H after Salem. What he had told these men had interested them so greatly that they had freely offered their help. Now they were here, ready for vengeance, to arrest or shoot down the bandit crew.

With these reinforcements, the Masked Rider swerved and started at a knot of Yager outlaws who were shooting at the approaching citizens. His Colts blared death and destruction to the enemy. Cursing, terror-stricken bandits took lead or threw up their hands in surrender.

The clang of battle rose high on the night air. Smoke from the burning barn gave the red-glowing surroundings an infernal aspect.

Ten outlaws went down in the first surge of the unexpected attack. A bunch that had nearly got free, only to face a determined ring of fighting men, had to turn and come back past the Masked Rider, whose deadly Colts roared over and over again. The rushers were closing their circle, trapping all but a few lucky outlaws who slipped through the noose.

The Masked Rider's pistols were hot in his hands as he shoved fresh shells into the cylinders.

"I want Blackie," he muttered, flipping sweat from his eyes.

A group of swirling, beaten bandits parted, and in their midst the Masked Rider glimpsed his arch-enemy, Blackie Salem.

"Throw down, Salem," he bellowed, "or I'll shoot!"

Blackie refused to surrender. Several of his men obeyed the command, for armed citizens were swinging on them. Salem's pistol spat fire and lead, but the slug only touched the Masked Rider's Stetson crown and whirled on through air. The Masked Rider, driving straight into the heart of the foe, shot Blackie Salem once, striking the cursing murderer's twisted face and finishing him off.

The sinister plotter against the Purple Ridges was slewed off his mustang as his animal, terrified by the flaming guns in its face, reared up and leaped to the side. Blackie landed on the ground, crumpled up in death.

With the end of the raiders' chief, came the end of the fight. The remaining outlaws threw their weapons to the ground, crying out in surrender. Citizens began seizing them, tying their hands to their saddle-horns, herding them together. A bucket brigade was formed to put out the barn fire, pails being passed from the big watering trough.

The Masked Rider, bleeding from several wounds, dismounted and limped in through the back door of the house, to the living room.

"Salem's dead and the gang's busted, Val," he growled.

Val Harrison was propped up on his couch. "Rider," Val cried, "yuh saved us and the ranch! But now that Apache will kill *her!*"

"Keep yore shirt on, Harrison," the Masked Rider said coolly. "I'll be back, pronto."

OUTSIDE the Star H ranchhouse he called the black stallion and rode off into the darkness. None tried to stop him, for he it was who had brought these men to capture the bandits.

A cheer went up, floating after him as the Masked Rider headed for the gates and disappeared in the night.

He began calling, soon, his signal floating off on the breeze. A reply reached him and he rode toward it. After a time, he sighted a horseman, a ghostly figure on a gray mount. Blue Hawk, his faithful comrade of the danger trail.

"Blue Hawk!" he exclaimed. "Yuh're alone! Where is she?"

"This way, Senor," the Yaqui said quietly.

The Masked Rider glanced quickly at the lean, dark, high-boned face. Blue Hawk, he read, was pleased with himself, in his quiet, stolid Indian way. Blue Hawk held up something attached to his belt.

"What's that?" demanded the Masked Rider.

Blue Hawk handed it to him, without a word. The Masked Rider struck a match to examine the object, although the feel of it told him what he would see. It was a chunk of black, straight hair attached to a large patch of brown scalp.

"Apache hair," grunted the Masked Rider.

"Si."

Back there, in some dark spot to which he had trailed his enemy, the Yaqui had met Cromo, the Apache. Silent as a moving panther, stealing

in with his long knife with such genius that even Cromo had not detected his approach, Blue Hawk had sprung upon his foe. In some hidden clump the body of Cromo now lay, to be discovered by the buzzards and wolves of the Purple Ridges.

Blue Hawk led him back along the trail, turned into a faint path that led them to a bower in the woods. Louise Allen leaped up as they approached. more, nor Cromo, nor Buff. Val's wounded but he'll recover, specially when he sees you're all right."

"You're so good," she murmured, and leaned back against him as Midnight carried them to the ranch.

Blue Hawk stayed off in the darkness while the Masked Rider escorted Louise Allen back to Harrison's. As he rode, it was with a wistful longing in his heart. He too, yearned for the

"Gunpowder for Gringoes—"

THAT'S THE BATTLE CRY OF DON LUIS GASPARO'S MEXICAN GUERILLA BAND IN

THE FIGHTING TEXANS

By WALKER A. TOMPKINS

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"Masked Rider!" she cried. "Please save me! Take me to the Star H. I—I'm . . . Is Val—" She began to sob, for what she had undergone would have crushed the nerve of any woman—or man.

The Masked Rider swept her up before him, and held her gently with an arm about her slim waist.

"Yuh're safe now, ma'am," he told her. "Salem won't bother yuh any peace of a home presided over by such a girl, but he knew he could never hope for such happiness.

He got down at the front steps, lifted Louise to the ground.

"Val's in there," he said gruffly.

She went inside and, from the door, the Masked Rider saw the intense joy Val and Louise felt at finding each alive.

"How'd yuh know, Masked Rider,

that it was all right to hit Salem?" called Val.

"I had a signal arranged with a friend," the Robin Hood outlaw called back. "When I heard it I savvied that Louise had been snatched from Cromo." He swung to the leader of the rushers. "Did yuh bring along that prisoner I give yuh, Smythe?"

"Yeah," replied Smythe, a burly, middle-aged man with fighting eyes. "Fetch him in, Dave."

CHICAGO Elms was shoved into the room, blinking in the lamplight.

"This hombre'll corroborate what I got to say," the Masked Rider said. "He's told me his story. The diamonds that've been found in the Purple Ridges belonged to him once."

"Salted!" someone growled.

"Yeah, but in a queer way," the Masked Rider told them. "This Elms is a clever city thief. He stole hundreds of rough and uncut diamonds from a big jeweler's place, Somers Brothers, in Chicago. He run out here with 'em. Blackie Salem found out he had the loot and Blackie laid a trail trap for Elms. Caught him, too, though he shot Harrison's cousin when the waddy happened along. I was on the trail that night, too. I found Elms, and a letter on him that put me on to Somers Brothers. Also one of the rough diamonds when it was light. Next day when Chicago Elms come to, he lay up at a ranch for awhile, then rode to Saddleville. Later, Blackie passed him money to leave the country, for Salem knowed Elms could give away the secret of how the diamonds come to be in the Purple Ridges."

The Masked Rider paused, looking about him.

"Salem planted them jewels, then?" asked Val.

"Nope, not at first—not on purpose, anyways. He meant to sell the gems when he could. However, I learned that durin' his run with me chasin' him, that night after he killed Val's cousin and robbed Chicago Elms, there was a hole worked in the bag and diamonds begun dropping out. He didn't know it and sprinkled quite a few around. They was found by a couple of waddies, and when Blackie seen 'em, he realized what he could do when news of the strike come out. That's why he wanted the ranches and land—to sell 'em off as minin' claims. When he took the Circle Two he planted a few of the diamonds, near that ranch so's to create a rush there. The Star H was the center of the find, located by Salem's droppin' them gems in the darkness!"

"I reckon we come on a false trail, gents," grunted the leader of the rushers. "Ain't no diamond fields here."

"Yuh'll hafta find 'em yoreself, case there are," said the Masked Rider. "Charlie and Joe believed they'd made a big strike. They wasn't fakin'." Blackie Salem savvied how valuable their belief was to him, for they're honest, decent men. If Salem had said he'd made the strike, he would have been suspected of saltin' the range, just as he did with the Circle Two, but Joe and Charlie never would be. Salem took advantage of this and went after the Star H and surroundin' lands. I couldn't guess what it was all about, at first, but when I finally wired Somers Brothers, then the business was clear."

"Masked Rider," cried Harrison, "yuh've saved us all from horror and death! We'll never forget, will we, gents?"

A cheer rose for the Masked Rider but, modest as he was brave, he wanted neither thanks nor reward.

"Anything we got is yores Masked Rider," Val Harrison said, his arm around Louise.

The fear had gone from Louise's lovely eyes. For at last she was freed from her terrible dread of Blackie Salem.

"I don't ask anything, gents," drawled the Masked Rider, " 'cept the freedom of Chicago Elms. He's been punished enough, and he's goin' to try to make it straight from now on. If he don't, he might bump into me again."

"I—I'll go straight, Masked Rider, so help me!" cried Elms.

THE Masked Rider raised his gloved hand, sang out *"Adios,"* jauntily, cheerily. They said good-by to him, and cheered him again as he left the ranchhouse.

Out beyond, he rejoined Blue Hawk, who was waiting for him. The Masked Rider swung Midnight onto the trail, away from the Purple Ridges. The Yaqui rode with him. They picked up their horses and gear, and started off.

The tall Robin Hood outlaw's shoulders were squared. Always ahead lay adventure, the satisfaction of helping those who needed him. The Masked Rider would never say die.

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A Masked Rider Novel by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

PEACEABLE MAN

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TAINTED GOLD

By REEVE WALKER

Author of "Paige of the Pony Express," "Rodeo Rider," etc.

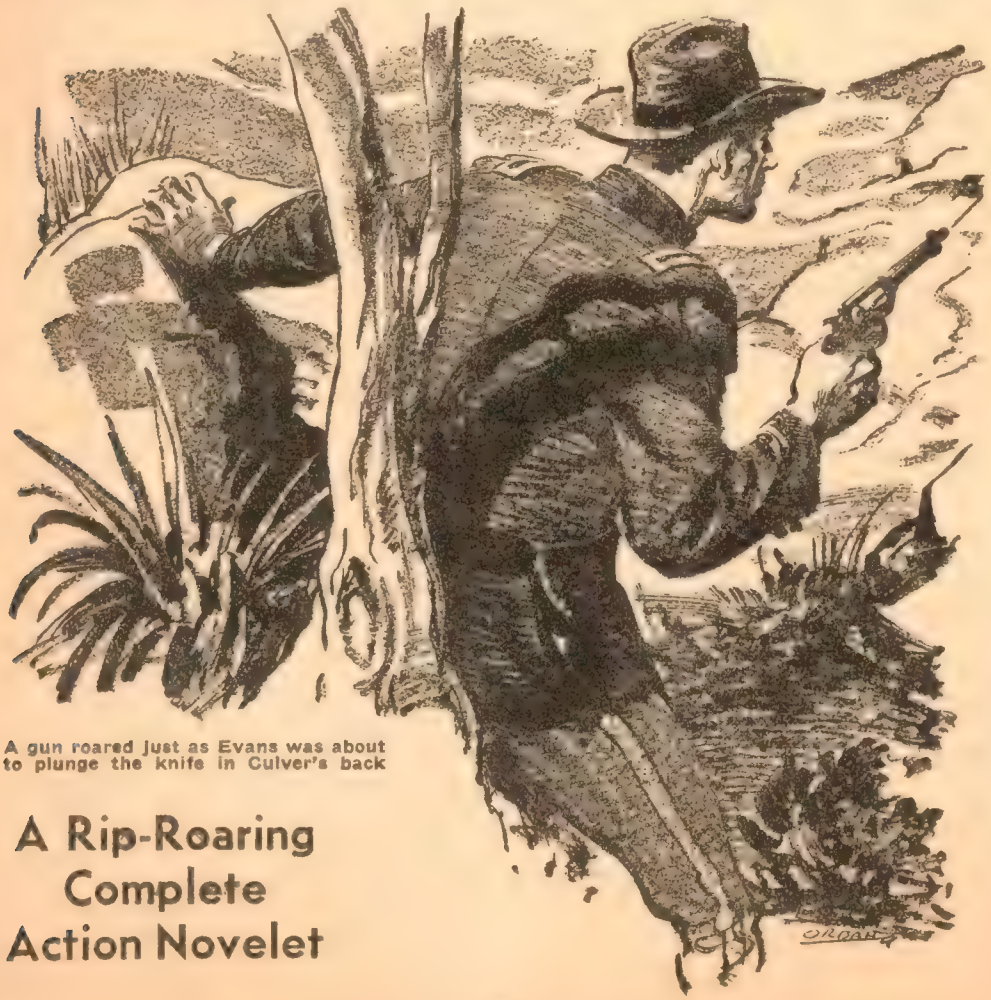
CHAPTER I

Missing Calves

IT was the kind of weather to make a man loaf along, even though he did have a lot of things that were pressing on his mind. There hadn't been much shade in the last two miles that Buliver had traveled across the south section of the Twisted M range, and the cool shadows cast by the thick green branches of the big oak looked mighty inviting.

"Reckon it won't do no harm to give my hoss a little rest," Buliver said, as he reined in toward the tree. "We been goin' right steady since sun-up."

He dropped the reins as he slid out of the saddle, and the pinto snorted, glad to get where the hot sun wasn't beating down on him so steadily. Buliver stretched and limbered up to get the saddle kinks out of his long,



A gun roared just as Evans was about to plunge the knife in Culver's back

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When Cattle Rustlers Prey Upon the Range, Clint Buliver Uses His Six-Gun Skill to Salivate the Night-Stalking Buzzards!

lean body. He pulled off his Stetson and let what little breeze there was fan his strong young face and his thick, dark hair.

"Shade shore feels good, don't it, Dapper," he said, pulling out a bag of tobacco and papers, and rolling himself a quirly.

The horse just flipped his ears. Buliver rolled his smoke and stuck the cigarette between his lips. He had a match lighted, when he saw a horseman come dashing out of a rocky draw over to the west and ride hell-for-leather toward the big oak.

"That's Shorty Doone," muttered Buliver, "and he's shore goin' some place in a hurry."

Clint Buliver wasn't a man to get excited unless he had a good reason, for if he had been, Rance Madigan never would have made him foreman of the Twisted M outfit. The Old Man didn't like a flighty hombre any more than he did a spooky horse.

Buliver took a deep drag on his smoke, made sure it was burning good, then blew out the match, holding the quirly in his hand. He let loose a cowboy yell that attracted Shorty Doone's attention and brought him heading for the tree.

"What's eatin' yuh, Shorty?" demanded Buliver, as the Twisted M waddy brought his mount to a quick stop close to the foreman. "A bear

chase yuh, or somethin'?"

"I just come from the west pasture," panted Shorty, looking like a chipmunk that had taken to riding a horse. "There's twenty more calves missin', Clint! Somebody must have stole them durin' the night."

"The Old Man will be fit to tie," Buliver said. "Yuh find any sign of who done it, Shorty?"

"None." Doone shook his head. "Fence ain't been cut, and yuh know how it is on the north side of the pasture. Ain't nobody gonna be able to drive them dogies over the cliff there without killin' every one of them from the drop down." The little waddy frowned. "I was aimin' to tell the boss about it, pronto."

"Shore, we'll have to tell him all right," the foreman said. "But this is the third time it's happened in the past month." Buliver dropped his cigarette and put out the burning tip with his boot-heel. "With this last bunch, it makes close onto sixty head of critters that have just disappeared like they had wings."

"I know." Doone nodded. "And no tracks or nothin'. Me, I shore hate to face the Old Man."

"Mebbe we better go back and take another look around the pasture before we head for the ranch," said Buliver. "It ain't but a mile from here. The boss has been raisin' hob with me for not findin' them rustlers."

"Suits me," Shorty agreed. "Let's head back to the pasture."

BULIVER picked up his reins, swung into the saddle, and the two men headed west across the range. Meeting up with the foreman had calmed down the little waddy somewhat. They kept riding at a steady pace that ate up the distance, but their mounts were just going at a trot instead of a gallop.

Soon, Buliver could look ahead and see the barb-wire of the pasture fence shining in the sunlight. The strands were new and still held a silvery glint that would fade after they had been exposed to the weather for any length of time.

"Yuh reckon the boss is still goin' to suspect Jack Rabin's Rambling R outfit of rustlin' them critters?" Shorty asked, as he rode beside the foreman.

"Might be," said Buliver. "The way Madigan and Rabin have been actin', it seems like they figger each other a couple of hoss thieves. Heard tell they used to be the best of friends, too, but that was before you and me joined the outfit."

The two men reached the fence and headed for the gate. It was closed and locked with a padlock. Both Shorty and Buliver had keys to the lock in their pockets. The foreman did not consider the fact that the gate to the pasture being locked was important. If rustlers wanted to be bold enough about it, they would not hesitate to clip the barb-wire with a pair of wire-cutters.

It was the absence of tracks that puzzled Clint Buliver. The ground around the gate was soft because of the little creek that flowed through the pasture, but there was no sign of the cattle having been driven out through the gate. Nor could the two Twisted M men find any place where the fence had been cut and then repaired.

"Looks like them dogies shore grew wings," muttered Shorty. "They was here last night, and now they're gone."

Buliver got to thinking and figuring like he naturally would when there was something puzzling him a heap. The pasture was an enclosure about a hundred yards square, and was fenced in on all four sides. It was used mostly for holding young cattle overnight until the outfit could get working on branding them the next morning.

"Let's take a look around inside."

Buliver took his key out of a pocket of his levis and unlocked the padlock. "We might see somethin'."

They went inside the enclosure. Here, there were plenty of tracks of both cattle and horses, but none of them were fresh. For the hot sun had baked them hard and dust had drifted into the marks on the ground.

Buliver and Shorty wandered over to the north side of the pasture. Beyond the fence was a ten-foot space leading to the lip of a cliff and it was

a sheer drop down thirty feet to the floor of a canyon below. The Rambling R land on the opposite side of the gulch was lower—and barren. With the exception of a few tree stumps.

The big old oak tree growing near the edge of the cliff inside the fence cast a little shade, but most of the plateau was sweltering in the heat.

THE foreman climbed through the fence and stepped out on the cliff. The little waddy watched him languidly, mopping his perspiration-streaked face with the neckerchief he wore.

"Yuh figger mebbe they climbed the tree?" Shorty asked, as he saw Buliver walking around the oak and looking up at the green branches.

"Nope." Buliver shook his head. He kept looking at the leaves and twigs that had fallen beneath the tree, as though they puzzled him. "It's too much for me, Shorty. Reckon we better ride back to the ranch and tell the Old Man what's happened."

They returned to their horses and swung into saddles, cursing softly because the sun had made the leather so hot.

It was just as they were riding away that they heard it. Two shots that were mighty loud and sinister in the hot, dry silence.

"Them ain't fire-crackers!" muttered Shorty.

The drumming of a horse's hoofs grew louder as they sat their saddles, listening. A third shot echoed whip-like against the walls of the canyon beyond the pasture. Over to the west a rider rounded a clump of cottonwoods, swerving so close to the trees that he brushed a branch. The white blossoms fluttered to the ground behind him like snow.

"Rifle shots," Buliver said, his keen gaze fixed on the horseman. "And that jasper ain't even carrying a saddle gun. Looks like somebody has been tryin' to down him."

"Soldier, judgin' from his uniform." Shorty Doone also was watching the mounted man intently. "Don't see so many of them around this part of the country." The little waddy had brightened up like the chipmunk he resembled would at sight of food. "Yuh reckon it's a private fight or can anybody get in?"

The man in the blue uniform of an army captain had seen them, and was riding closer. The rifle had stopped roaring and the only sound was the thudding of the oncoming horse's hoofs.

Buliver and Doone sat waiting, their eyes constantly searching behind the soldier, looking for whoever it was that had apparently been trying to drygulch the man in uniform. He reached the two waddies and drew his horse to a halt.

"That was close," he said. "Those first two shots nearly got me." He was a dark-haired man of about thirty, with the cloth bars of a cap-

tain on his shoulders. His uniform was dusty and threadbare, as though he had worn it for a long time. "Hope you aren't friends of that man with the rifle."

"We're not," said Buliver. "Yuh mind tellin' us who yuh might be?"

"Captain Tuck Bell," answered the man in uniform. He laughed harshly. "At least I was Captain Bell until I resigned from the army about six months ago. Guess I don't still rate the title."

"Yuh can be a general, for all we care," Shorty said. "Why was the hombre with the rifle tryin' to down yuh?"

"He shouted something about keeping off Rambling R range," said Captain Bell. "Is there a range feud going on around here?"

"Not exactly," Buliver said. "It's just that Twisted M men ain't welcome on Rambling R land, and that works both ways."

Bell's keen eyes had not missed the crooked-looking M brand on the horses of Madigan's two waddies. The captain seemed quite calm for a man who had been in danger of losing his life a few minutes ago.

"Which means Rambling R men are not welcome on Twisted M property either, I suppose?" he said.

"Yuh guessed it." Clint Buliver nodded. "It's the boss' idea—not ours. We ain't got any personal feelin' against the Rambling R."

Buliver sat relaxed in his saddle, listening to the captain and answering questions. He didn't pay much attention when Bell fumbled with the flap of the closed holster the man in uniform wore on a belt around his waist.

Suddenly then, the two Twisted M waddies found themselves covered by the army Colt that had seemed to leap into the captain's hand.

"All right, you two," Bell said grimly. "Now you're going to tell me where the treasure is hidden!"

CHAPTER II

Strange Fight

CLINT BULIVER sat there gaping at Captain Bell. His fingers were itching to grab his gun and try for a shoot-out, but the ex-army officer was holding his Colt like he was anxious to use it, and his eyes were hard and glittering.

"Where is it?" Bell repeated. "I want that treasure."

"Wait a minute," Buliver said quietly, like he figured Bell was crazy and the best to do was humor him. "Let's get this straight, Captain. What makes yuh think me and Shorty know anythin' about a treasure?"

"I don't know about that little monkey." Bell nodded at Shorty, who bristled up like a porcupine. "But you was pointed out to me as knowing where the treasure was hidden."

Buliver was doing a heap of thinking in a hurry. First off, all this talk about treasure didn't make sense. And then he began to get an inkling of what it was all about. He had heard men around this section of the country talking about some old Indian treasure buried on the range, but he hadn't paid much attention.

There wasn't any doubt in his mind that he hadn't the faintest idea where the treasure was hidden, if there really was one. What had him puzzled the most, was why anyone should have pointed him out to Bell, claiming he knew where the treasure could be found.

"Who told yuh about me?" he asked.

"That doesn't matter," said the captain. "The important thing is what you know. I want that information."

"Why, yuh—" Shorty let loose a string of profanity that was remarkable for its color and lack of repetition.

Bell's face turned red at the way

Shorty was cussing him, and Buliver figured now was the time to go into action.

He dug spurs into Dapper. The pinto's dignity was injured, and he voiced equine protest in the only way he knew. He leaped forward and jarred against Bell's sorrel so heavily it nearly knocked the captain out of the saddle, and the gun fell out of his hand.

Two arms flashed down, and now Bell found himself covered by the guns of the Twisted M waddies. The ex-army officer looked very unhappy about the whole thing.

"Let's shoot off the tips of his ears just to teach him not to be so all-fired rude to his betters, Clint," suggested Shorty, cocking his gun.

"Just a minute!" Bell protested, and it seemed like he really believed Shorty's threat. "I guess I made a foolish mistake in pulling my gun on you that way—"

"Foolish ain't the word for it," interrupted Shorty. "It was plumb fatal. Me, I never liked the army, anyway. Always figgered on joinin' the navy, but never got around to it."

"Be quiet, Shorty," said Buliver. "Yuh even chatter like a chipmunk." The foreman glared at Bell. "Listen, Mister, there's one thing I want yuh to get straight in yore mind. I ain't got any more idea where there's a treaure buried than the man in the moon."

"Guess I might as well put my cards on the table face up," the captain said wearily. "The treasure I'm looking for is buried somewhere on this range —at least hidden here—but it isn't any old Indian loot like I've heard men around here sayin'."

"What is it then?" demanded Buliver.

"Fifty thousand dollars worth of gold that was stolen from the Overland Limited by a bunch of train robbers five years ago," stated Bell. "I've been working under cover for the Government looking for that gold." His voice grew commanding. "Now put those guns away, if you know what's good for you!"

BULIVER sighed like he had picked himself a chore he didn't much care for doing. He slid his gun back in its holster, and then dropped out of the saddle. He didn't like the way the captain was acting high and mighty, and he aimed to do something about it.

"Get off yore hoss," he said, as he unbuckled his gun-belt and dropped it to the ground. "There's ways of provin' whether a man is lyin' or not."

Bell caught on quick, for he slid out of the saddle, ground-hitching his horse just like Buliver had done with his pinto. Shorty sat in the saddle, his gun still in his hand and a puzzled frown on his face. The little waddy knew something was going to happen, but he couldn't figure quite what it would be.

Captain Bell unfastened his belt that held the empty holster, and placed it on the ground. He took off his army uniform coat, folded it neatly and put it down beside the belt. He was wearing a flannel shirt beneath it.

"Maybe you are the one who needs convincing," he said. "I don't like to be considered a liar."

"Liar!" said Buliver, quiet-like but firm.

Then Bell leaped forward, and they were smashing heavy fists at each other. Both men could fight, and they weren't fooling about it. Shorty sat in his saddle watching open-mouthed, the gun in his hand forgotten until he finally noticed it and dropped it back into the holster.

Bell bore in with both hands gunning for Buliver's body. He sank one of them under the foreman's heart and fire raced through Buliver's lungs. Buliver took three hooks getting set for the punch he wanted. Then Bell threw another one, and Buliver landed just ahead of it with a pile-driving right to the heart. The captain

blinked like it hurt plenty.

It was a grim and gory fight while it lasted, for both men were aiming to beat the living daylights out of each other, yet strange to say neither one of them was mad. It was just one of those things they figured on doing.

Finally, Bell started to stagger. His clothes were soaked with perspiration and his face bloody from a cut lip. Buliver could see the captain was weakening fast.

"Yuh still claim yuh're a Government man?" Bulliver panted. "Or were yuh lyin'?"

"Still claim it," muttered Bell. "It's the truth."

"And yuh was sent here to try and find the fifty thousand in gold?"

"I was."

"Then there ain't no sense in us fightin' any longer," said Buliver.

HE lowered his arms tired-like, and just stood there grinning weakly. He had planned to beat the truth out of Bell and he had done it, but a victory like that made a man seem right foolish.

"Reckon I've been kind of feeling my oats," he said.

"And I keep forgetting I'm not still an officer in command of a company," said the ex-captain. He held out his hand. "I could use a friend."

"Yuh got one." Buliver clasped Bell's hand firmly and then dropped it. "Seems like yuh're a man to ride the river with, Bell."

"I've heard cowboys use that expression before," Bell said. "But I never knew exactly what it meant."

"Way of sayin' yuh like a hombre," Buliver explained. "Takes a good man to help drive a herd across a river."

"Reckon I take back what I said about the army," called out Shorty Doone. "Yuh shore put up a good fight, Captain."

"Thanks." Bell grinned. "And you did some remarkable cussing."

"Shucks," said the little waddy, embarrassed. "If yuh ain't careful, I'll get to likin' yuh—and I been plumb set against it."

"Yuh mind tellin' me one thing?" asked Buliver, looking at Bell.

"What's that?"

"Who was the hombre that pointed me out as knowin' about the treasure?" demanded Buliver.

"Why, man named 'Muddy' Rivers," answered the captain as he picked up his coat. "I believe he rides for the Rambling R outfit."

"I know he does," Buliver said grimly. "And I aim to find out what sort of an underhand trick that sidewinder is trying to pull!"

CHAPTER III

When Old Friends Meet

ALONG about noon, Cliff Buliver and Shorty Doone rode into the Twisted M ranch and gave their horses a rubdown, watered them and turned them into the cavvy corral.

Buliver and Captain Bell had washed up in the little creek in the pasture after their fight, and then the three men had spent some time sitting in the shade cooling off and talking.

The two waddies had told the Government man about the rustling. While it wasn't part of Bell's job to discover cattle thieves, they figured the captain just might learn something that would help them while he was looking around. Bell had asked them not to tell any one his reason for being in this part of the country and they had agreed.

"Reckon we better go up to the house and tell the Old Man about them missin' cattle," said Buliver. "Come on, Shorty. Let's get it over with."

"Wait a minute," Shorty protested.

"There ain't no need of me seein' Madigan. Yuh're the foreman, and it's yore job to give him the bad news, Clint."

Scared?" Buliver taunted.

"Shore." Shorty nodded. "I'd a heap rather face a den of hungry wildcats than the boss when he gets good and mad."

Buliver just grinned and went on up to the ranchhouse.

The owner of the Twisted M was sitting on the porch, and looking like he had been eating something that didn't agree with him. Every time Buliver looked at his boss, he got to thinking that it was men like Rance Madigan that had a heap to do with making the West the country it was now.

Madigan was a lean, gray-haired man with a drooping mustache. And he was plenty tough and wiry, even though he was edging on to sixty. He ramrodded the spread with a firm hand, and when he gave an order it was carried out—or else.

"Well?" he grunted, when Buliver came up on the porch. "Yuh find any sign of them rustlers?"

"They been around," said the foreman calmly. "There's twenty head of calves missin' from the north pasture."

Madigan just sat there for a moment not saying anything, and Buliver stood waiting for the old man to give a tongue-lashing. But the ranch owner kept right on looking at his foreman and keeping his teeth tightly clamped around his old brier pipe.

It wasn't long before Buliver found the silence oppressive, and he shifted from one foot to the other, restlessly. Madigan made him feel he had placed a heap of trust in him and the foreman had failed him. Buliver didn't like that any.

"Me and Shorty searched the pasture for tracks," Buliver said finally. "Didn't find any, though. I shore would like to know how they got those dogies out of there."

Madigan pulled his pipe out of his mouth and knocked out the ashes by hitting the briar against the porch rail. Then the owner of the Twisted M got to his feet and pulled his gunbelt around so the old single-action Colt in the holster on his right thigh was hanging free.

"Tell the boys to saddle up, and get yoreself a fresh hoss," he said. "We're going to pay a visit to the Rambling R."

"Yuh figger Rabin's outfit has been doin' the rustlin'?" asked Buliver.

"I aim to tell Jack Rabin so," Madigan said flatly. "Get the men and the hosses."

Clint Buliver started to protest, but a look from the owner of the Twisted M silenced him before he could utter a word. The foreman could see what was coming, and he didn't like it. If Madigan came right out and accused the Rambling R of stealing his stock, it was likely to start a grim and bloody range war between the two spreads.

"Yuh ain't got any proof," Buliver said, as he went down the steps. "Yuh're makin' a mistake, Boss."

"Get the men!"

WHEN Madigan talked in that tone of voice, Buliver knew there was no use arguing with him. You just did like he said and hoped for the best. Buliver went on down the steps and headed for the bunkhouse.

It was evident now that Madigan had been figuring on going to the Rambling R, or he wouldn't have had the outfit loafing around the spread like they were.

About twenty minutes later, the ten waddies of the Twisted M outfit were mounted and ready to ride. Rance Madigan was out in front of his men, riding the big sorrel that was the favorite horse in his string, and Buliver was close beside him, mounted on a pinto.

"Let's go," Madigan said.

They headed north across the rangeland toward the Rambling R. It was past noon and the sun was burning hot. The men were just riding along not saying much, for they realized they were heading for trouble.

There wasn't one of them who wouldn't willingly die fighting for the home spread, but they weren't sure that Madigan was right. It was like Buliver had said, the old man didn't have any proof that Rabin's outfit was doing the rustling.

Rabin or some of his men must have seen them before they reached the spread, for when they rode close to the buildings of the Rambling R, they could see a cluster of men gathered in front of the ranchhouse.

"Looks like they're expectin' trouble," said Madigan. "Just goes to prove Jack Rabin has a guilty conscience like I figgered."

Buliver couldn't decide whether Madigan was right or not, so he didn't say anything. They rode closer, the only sound the drumming of their horses' hoofs and the creaking of saddle leather. When they reached the ranchhouse, Madigan reined up close to the porch and sat glaring at Rabin, as the owner of the Rambling R stood on the porch.

"We've come for our stock, Rabin," Madigan said darkly.

"What stock yuh talkin' about, Madigan?" Rabin was a smallish, gray-haired man who looked like a bantam rooster as he stood there. "Yuh accusin' us of rustlin' yore beef critters?"

Buliver saw that the Rambling R men were spread out so that they were set right if any shooting should start. There wasn't one of them that wasn't watching the Twisted M bunch warily, and looking poker-faced and cold-eyed. The foreman felt like he was sitting on a keg of blasting powder with the fuse burning slow but steady.

"Sixty head of my calves are missin'," Madigan went on. "Yuh know anything about that, Rabin?"

Clint Buliver's gaze centered on Muddy Rivers. He had never liked the lean, narrow-eyed Rambling R waddy, and he still wanted to know why Muddy had pointed him out to Bell and told the captain about Buliver knowing about the treasure.

"No, I don't know what's happened to yore stock!" roared Rabin angrily. "But losin' them calves is what a dirty double-crossin' polecat like you deserves, Rance Madigan."

Madigan's hand dropped toward his gun as Rabin's fingers flashed toward his holster. Everybody could see that hell was going to break loose in just about the shake of a lamb's tail, but it was Clint Buliver who suddenly and unexpectedly took over the play.

The foreman's bone-handled guns seemed to leap into his hands, and one of them was covering Madigan and the other Rabin.

"Either of yuh draw, and I'll plug yuh shore!" Buliver snapped.

BOTH ranch owners saw that the dark-haired waddy meant just what he said, and they pulled their hands away from their gun butts like they had burned their fingers. Madigan kept looking at his foreman like he thought Buliver had suddenly gone loco.

"What's the idea, Clint?" demanded Madigan. "Yuh sidin' with the Rambling R all of a sudden?"

"Ain't sidin' with Rabin or you either right now," Buliver said grimly. "Don't intent to let you two bull-headed old fools kill each other off, neither."

"Mebbe it's Buliver that's been doin' the rustlin'," snarled Muddy Rivers. "Could be he don't want trouble to start, for fear we'll get to the bottom of this and learn who did steal them twenty head of Twisted M dogies from the north pasture last night."

"Yuh heard him!" Madigan exclaimed, fiercely excited. "How did

Muddy know there was just twenty of my calves rustled if the Rambling R ain't been doin' the rustling?"

"That's right." Rabin nodded in agreement. "Yuh said sixty of yore calves were missin', Rance, but yuh ain't mentioned nothin' about losin' more stock last night." The owner of the Rambling R turned to the narrow-eyed waddy. "How did yuh know about that, Muddy?"

Buliver saw that Muddy Rivers looked scared, and it was evident he was thinking fast, like a man will when he finds himself in a tight place. "I ran across an hombre in army uniform this noon," Muddy Rivers said quickly. "Jasper that called himself Captain Bell. He said he had met up with Clint Buliver and Shorty Doone, and they told him about the twenty Twisted M dogies bein' missin'."

"How about it, Buliver?" asked Rabin. "Is Rivers tellin' the truth?"

"Seems like." Buliver nodded. "We ran across an ex-army officer named Bell all right, and we did tell him about the stock bein' missin'." The foreman frowned. "Listen, Rabin, I want you and Madigan to go into the house and we'll talk this over peaceful-like."

The two old men hesitated a moment, and then nodded. Rabin waited until Madigan and Buliver swung out of their saddles and walked up on the porch. The men of the two outfits relaxed as they saw trouble wasn't likely to start right away.

The owner of the Twisted M and his foreman trailed Jack Rabin into the big living room of the ranchhouse.

"Now suppose yuh two old mossbacks tell me why the gold that was stolen during the Overland Limited train robbery about a year back has been makin' yuh so proddy," Buliver said calmly, when he found himself alone with the two ranch owners.

The two cattlemen stood gazing at him in open-mouthed amazement.

"How in the ring-tailed blue blazes did yuh know about that?" Rance Madigan demanded dazedly.

CHAPTER IV

Hidden Gold

RANCE MADIGAN and Jack Rabin got over their surprise in a hurry, when Buliver told them just how he had figured things the way he had.

He knew he could trust these men not to let it go any further, when he told them all he had learned about the loot. How the gold had been missing ever since the Overland Limited had been robbed five years ago, and that Captain Bell was a Government man who was searching for the fifty thousand.

"So that's it!" Madigan exclaimed. He still looked like he could chew nails, but he was a heap calmer than he had been when he'd started to draw down on Rabin out in front of the house. "We knew about the gold all right. 'Bout a year ago me and Rabin was workin' a roundup together like we usually did in them days."

"Shore," Rabin said bitterly. "We was friends then!"

"Keep still and let me tell it!" Madigan glared at the owner of the Rambling R. "Anyway, we had a feller named Smith that was chuckwagon cook for the two outfits. One day the chuckwagon rolled over Smith and crushed him so bad he was dyin' when me and Rabin found him."

"That's right." Rabin seemed bound to have his say. "Smith knew he didn't have long to live, so he told us he was the only one left alive of the train robbers that had stole the gold from the Limited. They had hid it around this part of the country, aimin' to come back and get it when they figgered the excitement had died down."

"Never made it, though," Madigan

continued, as Rabin paused. "They was killed in a raid down near the Mexican Border, and only Smith got away. He didn't know exactly where the gold was buried, except it was somewhere on Twisted M or Rambling R land. So he come up in this country and got him a job as a ranch cook so he could look around for the loot."

Rabin broke in again.

"Me and Rance agreed that if we found the loot we were gonna turn it over to the authorities and just collect the reward that's still standin'." Rabin glared at the owner of the Twisted M. "We figgered on bein' honest about it then."

"Why, yuh old buzzard!" roared Madigan. "Yuh still claimin' I'm crooked?" He looked like he was again about to grab for his gun.

"Wait a minute, Boss," Buliver said soothingly. "Let Rabin finish tellin' it before yuh go flyin' off the handle."

"Then, about six months ago, Madigan gets rich sudden-like." Rabin was talking fast and addressing Buliver, as if he wanted the foreman to hear it all before trouble started. "I figger Madigan has found the gold and is usin' it himself without even turnin' it in and collectin' the reward for both of us like we planned."

"Yuh figgered wrong!" Madigan snapped. "Happened that I inherited ten thousand dollars from an uncle of mine along about then." He frowned at Rabin. "Would have told yuh so, if yuh'd asked me. But no, yuh had to go thinkin' the worst about an old friend."

"Mebbe I was a mite hasty," Rabin said slowly.

"Of course yuh were!" Madigan yelped. "When yuh got to callin' me a thief and a cheat and a lot of things like that, I didn't know what yuh were talkin' about. But it shore made me hot under the collar."

"Ain't no worse than havin' a man think yuh're a rustler," said Rabin. "And yuh been accusin' me of that."

"Looks to me like yuh both been wrong," Buliver said. "Mebbe I better knock yore heads together and try and get some sense into them."

MADIGAN looked at Rabin, and he was grinning like he was feeling mightly relieved in his mind. Rabin's eyes were twinkling like they hadn't for a long time.

"He crows mighty loud for a young rooster," said Madigan, looking at his foreman, and then glancing at Rabin. "Yuh reckon we better clip his wings before he gets to flyin' over the fence, Jack?"

"Guess we better just let him crow, Rance," said Rabin. "Seein' as he kept a couple of old fools from killin' each other."

"I ain't old," Madigan protested. I'm six months younger than you are, Jack, and yuh know it."

"Shore I know it," said Rabin. "Didn't I beat the daylights out of yuh when we played checkers on yore last birthday. May Sixteenth, that was."

"Yuh remembered, Jack? Got the date down pat, too, huh? I—I'm shore sorry I misjudged yuh like I been doin'."

"Shut up, yuh old fool," Rabin grumbled. "Yuh ain't been half as wrong as I have."

Then they were pounding each other on the back and kind of half laughing and half crying, like a couple of old men will when they find they still have a friend they can trust to ride the river with. Clint Buliver just stood there grinning and feeling mighty good about it all.

After that, there wasn't any doubt that there wouldn't be any range war between the Twisted M and the Rambling R from now on. The foreman walked out onto the porch and smiled at the men who were waiting around still feeling a little anxious.

"There ain't gonna be any war,"

Buliver announced. "Our bosses done practically kissed and made up."

He could see the men relaxing, and somebody let out a cowboy yell. He noticed, too, that Muddy Rivers had drifted away and was no longer in sight.

A little while later, the Twisted M outfit was riding home again with the old man sitting straight and proud in the saddle, as he led his men. Buliver was beside him. They were walking their horses through the hot sunshine and feeling lazy and peaceful, now that the impending trouble had passed.

Buliver realized that finding the rustlers and the missing gold was still important, but it sure was a relief to the foreman to know there wouldn't be any range war between the Twisted M and the Rambling R outfits.

During the next couple of days, the Twisted M men settled down to their work. They finished a beef tally and culled out another crop of one-year-olds. Buliver talked with Madigan and got the old man to agree to bait a trap for the rustlers by putting another bunch of young stock in the north pasture.

Madigan ordered a small herd of dogies driven into the north pasture, and the men acted like they thought their boss was crazy. But they obeyed orders.

THE ranch owner didn't want his outfit to think he was plain simple-minded, so he picked Shorty Doone to stand guard at the pasture during the night. The little waddy rode out there along about sundown.

After supper, Buliver rose from the table and announced he was riding into town on business for the old man. He went out to the corral and roped and saddle Dapper. The pinto was fresh and raring to go.

The foreman rode off, heading in the direction of the little cowtown until he was out of sight of the ranch. Then he circled around in the direction of the north pasture.

Clint Buliver wasn't in any hurry, for he felt that if the rustlers were working the way he thought they were, it would take them a good bit of time to get all set and ready to start. He just loafed along, stopping a couple of times to stretch his legs and have a smoke.

By the time Buliver found he was getting close to the north pasture, there was a full moon shining and the rugged country around him looked mighty spooky in the pale light.

Buliver had been remembering a lot of things during the ride. Like the way Captain Bell had come dashing out from around the clump of cottonwoods to get away from the man who had been shooting at the ex-army officer with a rifle.

"Bell said that hombre ordered him to keep off Rambling R range," Buliver muttered, as he thought about it again. "Hmm, that's Rambling R land on the other side of the gulch north of the pasture. Ties up with what I been figgerin' slick as a whistle."

He circled the pasture, keeping far enough away so that the sound of his horse's hoofs would not be heard. He reached a spot where he could overlook the cliff on the north side of the pasture, and then uttered an oath as his eyes took in the weird scene ahead of him.

A bawling calf seemed to leap up the big old oak tree and then go sailing across the gaping mouth of the canyon as though the dogie had wings to land on the other side.

Another followed and then Buliver's keen gaze discovered the cable stretched across from the tree to a stump on the opposite cliff, a cable that was a black line against the night sky!

Shadowy figures were working just inside the pasture, hoisting the calves up to the cable by a double surcingle

around the animal's middle that was fastened to a rope. A man up in the tree hooked the belly band around the calf to a pulley, and then played out a light line as the animal went sliding down the cable.

A hundred feet across the gulch other men caught the calf, unfastened him from the pulley and double-surcingle, and the man in the tree pulled it all back with his line for another load.

Buliver saw that the men on the far cliff were loading the dogies into two big wagons. He sat in the saddle watching in open-mouthed amazement. He had suspected the rustlers were using some means of getting the cattle, but he had not even thought of anything as efficient as the method they were using.

"So that's how it's done," Buliver muttered. "Figgered it might be something like this when I seen the way all the leaves and twigs had fallen under the big oak the mornin' after the last bunch of stock was rustled. Just thought mebbe they had been lowered down into the canyon by a rope, though."

The four men were working as noiselessly as possible, but they could not prevent the bawling of the frightened calves and the hum of the cable as the pulley rolled along it. Buliver saw that the rustlers appeared to be experienced men who were doing the job well.

Bitter rage swept over him. No matter how good their method might be, these men were stealing Twisted M stock. And Clint Buliver intended to stop them at once. He urged his horse forward, right-hand gun clutched tightly in his grip.

It was the man up in the tree branches who saw the oncoming rider first. He released the calf he had just fastened to the pulley, and let it go sliding on down the cable. He grabbed his gun and fired, the bullet whistling close to Buliver's right ear.

Then Buliver's own gun was blazing, his bullets smashing into the body of the man up in the tree. The rustler came hurtling out into space, struck the ground with a dull thud and sprawled there motionless.

IT dawned on Buliver then that there had been something horribly familiar about the chunky little man.

"Don't shoot!" howled the other rustler, tossing his gun to the ground and extending his arms high in the air. "I give up!"

Buliver drew rein as he came closer. Muddy Rivers' face was vague in the moonlight as he stood there like he was reaching for something high above his head. The Twisted M foreman slid out of saddle, dropping the reins to ground-hitch his horse. He knew then that he had acted too hastily. Across the gulch the two men with the wagons were getting away.

The foreman kept looking at the dead man sprawled out on the hard ground. He was certain he had been right about the stocky little figure, but he had to be sure.

"Shorty Doone?" he asked, nodding toward the dead man.

"That's right," Rivers said. "He was one of us."

Buliver just stood there covering Muddy with his gun. He was feeling a little sick inside, as a man will when he finds a waddy he had trusted hadn't been worth shucks. All the same, it hurt to know that he had killed Shorty. After all, the little man had been one of the Twisted M outfit.

"Get yore hoss," Buliver ordered, as he swung back into the saddle. "We're headin' for the cliff over there. I aim to trail that wagon."

By the way Rivers hastened to get his horse, Buliver could see what was going on in the mind of the Rambling R waddy. Muddy hoped that when Buliver got across on the other side of the canyon those other two outlaws would find a chance to down the fore-

man. Buliver wasn't worried about that. He was going to get those other two men or die trying.

Rivers rode off, leading the way to the trail that wound down into the floor of the gulch below and up the other side of the ravine. Buliver hung back a moment, wondering if he should make certain that Shorty was dead.

The little waddy looked so still and kind of pitiful lying there, and yet Buliver realized it must have been through Shorty that the rest of the rustlers had learned when there would be calves in the north pasture. He had been in this thing deep. Perhaps it was better this way than seeing him stretch hemp.

"Sorry, Shorty," muttered Buliver, as he rode on, trailing close behind Rivers. "It just couldn't be no other way."

It took close onto an hour for the two men to ride on down into the canyon and up onto the other cliff top. Buliver let Rivers continue to lead the way. Neither man spoke. They just kept riding. Finally, the top of the gulch loomed ahead.

They rode close to the big stump to which the lower end of the cable was attached. A calf was still there caught in the sling and bawling loudly.

Buliver halted his horse and swung out of the saddle. He couldn't see a dumb animal frightened like that. His boot-heel scraped on something hard in the soft ground at the side of the stump. He looked down, and then halted.

Part of a metal box was dimly visible in the moonlight.

Behind Buliver, the waddy from the Rambling R slid silently out of the saddle and stood beside his horse. Buliver drew out his jackknife and cut the rope that held the calf suspended from the pulley on the cable. The calf dropped, and then went scampering away on wobbly legs, the surcingle still around his body.

The foreman kept thinking of the way Shorty had looked like a chipmunk sitting in the saddle, and the way he could cuss. Buliver wasn't paying much attention to Muddy as he returned to his horse. The foreman's back was toward the Rambling R waddy as Buliver reached Dapper and started to climb into the saddle.

ABRUPTLY, Rivers leaped at him, a knife he had had hidden in his clothing now in his hand. But a gun roared just as Rivers was about to plunge the knife into Buliver's back.

Buliver whirled in time to see Rivers stagger back, the knife flying high into the air. Out of the brush stepped Captain Tuck Bell then, his smoking army revolver still in his hand.

"Thanks," Buliver said. "He nearly got me."

Rivers was dancing around and holding onto a wounded arm as he moaned in pain.

"I got those other two men," Captain Bell said calmly. "We fought it out as they were getting away with the wagon half loaded with calves."

"Yuh find the gold?" asked Buliver.

"No." The Government man shook his head. "I'm still looking."

"There ain't no gold," Rivers growled. "All that story about an Indian treasure is a lot of lies. I told yuh that Buliver knew about the treasure' cause I figgered that would get yuh watchin' him and leave us alone to do the rustlin'." He glared at Bell. "Yuh looked to me like yuh might have been a Ranger workin' under cover or somethin'. Ouch! This arm shore hurts!"

"Yuh figgered wrong, Muddy," said Buliver. "There's gold all right, but it ain't any old Indian treasure. It's fifty thousand dollars' worth of gold that's the loot the robbers got when they held up the Overland Limited five years ago."

"Fifty thousand!" Rivers said dazedly.

"Right, and you jaspers have been walkin' right over it every time yuh pulled off some of yore two-bit cattle rustlin'," Buliver added.

"What do you mean?" Bell demanded tensely. "Have you found the gold, Buliver?"

"Shore have," Buliver said. "But there are a couple of old men that have been figgerin' on claiming the reward for finding that gold. I'd like to see them get it."

HORSES' hoofs clattered noisily as a bunch of riders loomed into view. It proved to be Madigan and Rabin and some of their men. Twisted M and Rambling R riders had heard the shooting, and brought their bosses to the scene.

"What two men?" asked Captain Bell.

"Madigan and Rabin," answered Buliver.

"All right," the captain said. "I'll see to it that they get their share. Where's the gold?"

Buliver showed him the metal box his foot had scraped against.

Madigan and Rabin rode up then, and started asking questions. Buliver told them all about it, while the captain and the men were digging out the box. It took time, for the only tools they had were knives and their hands. But the dirt was soft.

It was the gold, all right. When he saw it, Muddy Rivers stood there cursing like a blue streak.

"Fifty thousand!" he moaned. "And me and them other hombres riskin' our lives on rustlin' that wouldn't have brought us in more'n a couple of hundred dollars apiece so far."

"Yuh won't need money where yuh're goin'," Rabin said grimly.

"Buliver asked me to see that you and Madigan got a share of the reward," Captain Bell told the owner of the Rambling R. "And I will."

"We don't want it," Madigan said. "It was Clint Buliver that found the gold and stopped the rustlin', and patched up our friendship."

"And he should get the reward," Rabin added.

Buliver felt mighty good when he heard them say it. But he knew he couldn't take it. A man would feel funny with money tainted with blood like that. Shucks, every time he got to spending any of it he would be hearing Shorty cussing like he always did.

"Maybe Shorty Doone has some folks somewhere that could be usin' that dinero," Buliver suggested.

Madigan and Rabin nodded understandingly. Buliver smiled. Like he always figured, it was men like them that made the West such a mighty fine country.

Next Issue: PEACEABLE MAN, a Novelet by THOMAS LAMAR

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RIDE TO NOWHERE

By ALLAN R. BOSWORTH

Author of "Bury Me Not," "Job for a Ranger," etc.

Brad Jackson Beats a Gang of Cold-Decking Tinhorns With a Six-Gun Straight and a Blond Queen of Hearts!

Brad stopped at the door of the trailer

BRAD JACKSON got back from Pecos Junction rodeo at sundown. Everybody on the ranch turned out to learn what luck he'd had in the three-day competition. When they first saw the strange procession coming up the canyon road, they thought Brad had won a lot of money and brought home those breed bulls he wanted. Then they thought he was drunk. Later they figured he was crazy.

His brush-scarred pickup was rolling through the mesquites and pulling Paisano, his roping horse, in the trailer. That was all right. But just behind the horse trailer, eating Brad's dust and raising mighty clouds of their own, were two big vans. When all three machines drew out into the level space before the ranchhouse, the ranch folk saw that the vans were all red and gold, with ornate lettering on their sides that said:

MADDEN'S MIDWAY ATTRACTIONS

Jim Hendricks, who was Brad's foreman and old enough to be his father, sucked in a breath and let it whistle out slowly.

"By gravy!" he suddenly cried. "The boy's drunker'n a hootowl!"

The other four hands said nothing, because Jim glared at them the minute after he'd spoken. Jim was privileged, but not they. Brad got out of the pickup. He was tall and he had to stoop. They saw his head was

bandaged, so that he couldn't wear his hat. Jim Hendricks was surprised all over again.

"Gosh, he got piled, too!" he added.

The way he said it, anyone would have known it was seldom that Brad Jackson couldn't stay on anything that had four legs and hair.

Brad waited by the pickup. Ordinarily everybody would have hurried out to the gate to ask if he had won the bronc riding and the calf roping. The party line was out of order and nobody else had gone to the rodeo because it was calving time and the crop was big. It had seemed as though every cow on the ranch had had a calf.

Those two vans stopped the cowhands' questions. Two men got out of the first van.

"Well, where do you want us to dump it?" one called surlily.

"I don't want yuh to dump it," retorted Brad, sore. "I want yuh to set it up. And what's more, it's gonna be runnin' and playin' music before yuh leave. It's gonna be playin' 'Over the Waves!' Savvy?"

THEY understood, all right. There were two other men in the second van, all of them wearing coveralls. They climbed down and began taking things out.

That was when everybody figured that Brad had been eating loco weed. The things they were taking out were wooden horses and purple camels and shiny poles and then there were some brass pipes belonging to a pipe organ. It was several minutes before anybody could speak. By that time they realized that Brad had brought home a merry-go-round.

When he came through the gate, the cowhands were so quiet that they could hear his boot-heels crunching the gravel walk. Jim Hendricks licked his lips.

"Howdy, Brad," Jim's voice broke. "How'd yuh—what—what did yuh win, son?"

Brad was visibly sore. He stopped and looked back at the four men. Then he walked on.

"Yeah," he said, as if he didn't want to talk about it. He motioned toward the herd of wooden horses and purple camels. "Where would yuh figger I got these, if I hadn't won?"

Jim swallowed and blinked. He knew Brad well enough to sense the boy had been hurt in some way besides that crack on the head.

"I wouldn't figger," Jim said slowly. "I never heard of one of them rigs bein' put up for a rodeo prize."

Brad merely grunted. For a little while he watched the four men. Obviously they had knocked down the merry-go-round and put it together a lot of times. They knew where everything went and it was taking shape fast. When it started to get dark, they hung a couple of banjo torches on the fence—the kind used at carnivals—and kept right on working.

It began to look like a merry-go-round. Brad started feeling better. He smiled. His face, like the rest of him, was lean and muscled. When he smiled, everybody was instantly surprised and felt good.

"It wasn't exactly a prize, Jim," he said finally. "I won six hundred dollars and bought this outfit."

Old Jim jumped. Everybody else jumped, but Jim was the only one who blurted out.

"*What?* You bought it? What for? You ain't in the circus business, son. Yuh're a cattleman! I thought yuh was gonna buy a couple of breed bulls."

Brad's smile turned a little wistful.

"Yeah, I was. But when I was just a kid, Jim—when I was stirrup-high to a Shetland—one of them outfits come to town. I never got to ride on it more'n four-five times."

Jim took off his hat and slowly collapsed on the steps by the morning-

glory vines. He fanned himself while he scratched his head.

"A merry-go-round!" he whispered.

"Oh, it's a good one," Brad said quickly. "Wait till yuh hear her. She's a lulu, all right! She's got 'Over the Waves' and 'La Paloma' and 'Blue Danube!' Wait till yuh hear her, boys. Wait till yuh ride on her. That little gasoline engine shore makes them hosses get up and mill."

Jim snorted. He and everybody else knew that there was a lot more to deal than Brad Jackson was telling.

* * * * *

AFTER the first day of the rodeo, Brad Jackson had strolled down the wooden sidewalk toward the lights and music. He limped a little. Winning day money in the steer wrestling, he had had to pull a big animal's forequarters down across one leg. The sorrel bronc's jolting had also left a soreness along his ribs that would be worse after he rode tomorrow and the next day. But he was happy. A man had to do this sort of work only once a year to prove to himself that he hadn't gone soft.

The night was soft. There were stars that could be found only in Texas. Hanging right over the rim-rocked hills, they were so close that one could reach out and touch them. There was a moon, too, and the music of the carnival: Barkers yelled. The smell of popcorn and peanuts drifted over the crowd. Folks laughed.

Brad bought popcorn and stood by the merry-go-round. The music sounded better when he was farther away. But here he could watch the swift, endless parade of horses and tigers and camels, with the torches gleaming on their paint and catching the colored glass in their trappings. He thought of that sorrel bronc, leaping for the suddenly opened gate of the chute. The fence bars, striping the sunlight along its hide, made the horse look like a tiger.

He smiled. The bronc had really been a tiger for those ten seconds before the whistle blew and the pickup men closed in to pull the flank strap loose.

It was sort of silly to stand here, eating popcorn and gawking at the merry-go-round. They were meant for kids. Still, there was a fascination about the music and the rhythmic motion. It was like sitting down and dancing, Brad thought.

Then the parade slowed. Faces that had been blurred stood out. The kid with the chocolate ice cream cone, half of it on his face. The young couple holding a baby on a gallant charger. Another young fellow and his sweetheart. Brad could tell they weren't married, but the chances were they would be, before long.

And then there was the girl. She was standing by a purple camel. The merry-go-round came to a smooth stop and brought her face to face with Brad. She was only a yard away. He knew he was gaping at her with his mouth open, but he couldn't take his eyes off her.

She wore a white jacket with brass buttons and gold braid and white trousers with braid on their seams. There was a visored cap on her hair, which was just like more of that gold braid, except that it had been dipped in something to give it a reddish tint.

Brad put popcorn into his mouth and closed it. He started to turn away, but she was smiling at him.

"Hello, cowboy!" she said.

Brad swallowed and nodded dazedly. He felt like a fool.

"Think you could ride one of these horses and not get thrown? I saw you ride that horse this afternoon. It was wonderful."

"Shucks!" Brad drew in a deep breath and something made him bold. "I don't know. I got a hunch if I ride, I'll be thrown—hard!"

Either she blushed, or he imagined it. Then she leaned toward him, holding on the camel's bridle. The music

was soft.

"Afraid, cowboy?" she taunted in a low voice.

"Not of the horse!" said Brad. He jumped aboard. "Have some popcorn?"

"Thanks. And a dime, too. Children are only a nickel."

HE had trouble finding the dime. There was a hundred dollars in bills, representing day money in the bronc riding and calf roping. He didn't intend to flash the roll, but it came out in his hand.

"Don't jump off, cowboy," she said. "I'll be back after I've collected the fares."

Brad held the camel's neck and watched her thread her way through an overgrown toyland of animals, lights and music. There was a boat that rocked behind him, with a seat for two. He climbed aboard, grinned to himself and ate some more popcorn. She was on the other side of the organ pipes and the engine, but when he closed his eyes to listen to the music, he could still see her. She had blue eyes that caught every whirling, dancing light of the carnival.

"Like it?" she asked suddenly at his side. He jumped and tried to get to his feet, but she motioned him down. "Don't stand. It's dangerous."

He moved over.

"All right. But you sit down, too."

The girl looked out into the whirl. he marveled that anybody could see anything where the torches and the wall of the sideshow tent ran by so swiftly. He sensed that her hesitation was due to fear of some kind. Then she got in.

"I guess it's all right," she said, "unless Mr. Madden comes along. He wouldn't like it. He owns the show."

"We don't owe him anythin'," replied Brad.

He felt like a king, sitting here with her.

"You're sort of in the show business, too, aren't you?" she asked. "I mean following the rodeos. Where do you go from here?"

Brad shook his head. "I don't go anywhere. Jest home. I ain't a professional rodeo rider. I'm a rancher."

"Oh!" Her eyes widened, and her lips formed a soft circle. "You mean you really live out here—you have a ranch of your own?"

"Yeah. I never go anywhere. Once in awhile I take a trainload of beef to Fort Worth."

Her voice was as soft as the music and much farther away.

"I think that would be wonderful, real horses and cattle and this country. I like it. It's kind of wild and free and you're not cooped up."

They passed the quarter-turn between two carnival tents. Out there were the mesquites, drenched with the moonlight. beyond them were the hills, with stars fairly brushing the rimrocks. There wasn't really time to see it, but Brad could imagine it from many summer nights.

"Sometimes," he said, "it ain't so wonderful. When there's a drought and the grass burns up and the whirlwinds blow, it gets pretty tough then. The cattle die. Yuh can see whole flocks of buzzards circlin' around, waitin' for 'em to fall. And sometimes in winter the blue northers come down from the Panhandle and—Heck, why am I talkin' thisaway?"

"I still think it's beautiful!" she breathed.

Brad laughed. "You don't get to ride a merry-go-round hereabouts."

She smiled back at him.

"I know your name. I saw it on the program. You're Brad Jackson. I'm Ann Smith—plain Ann Smith."

"No," he blurted before he thought. "I mean it ain't plain. It's pretty, like you!"

They hadn't realized that the merry-go-round had stopped. A bell clanged and the girl jumped out. He

stayed in the boat while she collected fares from a dozen new riders. When she came back, the music was "Moonlight and Roses." The boat might have been rocking down a silvery stream as far as Brad was concerned. He handed her a five-dollar bill.

"Never mind the change," he said. "Take out fifty rides."

Ann laughed and pulled an imaginary cord.

"Fifty rides to nowhere, coming up!" she called out.

BRAD had to laugh at himself, next day, remembering those words. He had got off the merry-go-round at the same spot from which he had started. He had been nowhere —or had he? Things looked different. He smiled more often.

He went out and roped his calf in fourteen and two-fifths seconds. He would have bettered that time, if Paisano hadn't let the rope go slack as the calf lay threshing, so that the calf nearly got up again. But then that girl in the grandstand meant nothing to Paisano. It was the best time of the event, however.

Then Brad drew a wall-eyed roan named Tumbleweed and rode him to a fare-you-well despite the soreness in his ribs. He cinched the day money again in the bucking horse contest.

That night he was back at the merry-go-round. And that night Madden came aboard. Ann hurriedly got out of the boat and went to meet him. He was a big man with a Panama hat and a cigar. He had thick, black brows and his face looked as if it had been oiled.

Brad conceived an instant dislike for Madden. He leaned too close to the girl as they talked. Once, after he had shot a sharp look in Brad's direction, he gave Ann's arm a squeeze. The girl shook her head. Madden said something else in her ear and she nodded. Then the show owner put the cigar back between his teeth and swung to the ground.

During the next ride, when Ann came back to the boat, Brad could see she was worried. She didn't get in and sit by him just then. She waited through several rides, until the customers had thinned.

"Do you ever gamble, Brad?" she asked abruptly. "Play cards, I mean?"

He grinned. "Some. Do you?"

"Of course not. But I mean would you—"

"I'd take a chance," Brad cut in. He drew a long breath and leaned closer to her than he had ever been. He found her hand and held it, though she tried to draw away. "I'd take a chance. Ann—with you, if you'll take one."

"Please!" she cried. "Please don't!"

But he timed it well. On that quarter-turn toward the silvery mesquites and the dark, rimrocked hills under the stars, he kissed her. And when the mesquites and the hills came back, whirling to the dreaminess of "Over the Waves," he kissed her again. This time she didn't struggle.

After that, with only a couple of late riders to collect from, they sat and talked about merry-go-rounds and ranches, about popcorn and the stars that almost looked like popcorn sprinkled in the sky and how you might reach out and touch the stars if you climbed on the rimrock.

It was midnight before either knew it. Brad got off at the same spot again, but this time he knew definitely that he had been somewhere. He wanted to take Ann to her hotel. She laughed happily and said she didn't live in a hotel. She lived in a trailer, that one over there. He saw her to the door, after she had checked in her cash. Then he kissed her good night.

Somehow, despite all this, she still looked worried.

THE finals were held the next day. Brad fell off a little in the calf roping, but he was still good enough

to take first place in the final money. And luck was good to him. He drew another bronc that tried to tie itself in a knot and he stuck through ten tortured seconds.

When he went to the carnival grounds in the early evening, he had nearly seven hundred dollars in his pocket, enough to buy a couple of pretty good Hereford bulls. For a minute he toyed with the idea of telling Ann the bulls were a wedding present, but he gave this up. She probably wouldn't know enough about pure-bred stock to appreciate them. Besides, he hadn't asked her to marry him.

"Look, Ann," he said, "where are yuh supposed to go from here? I mean where would yuh be goin', if—"

"We're playing Fort Stockton next week."

Now that the time had come, he felt awkward.

"Well, look, Ann, I got a hoss I have to take home to the ranch. Then I'll get the other car and—"

"There's Mr. Madden," she said, and left him.

In the last evening rush, everybody wanted to ride the merry-go-round before it was knocked down and carted away. Ann was too busy to talk. It was midnight before she had a chance to come back to the boat.

"I ain't goin' home till I've had a few words with yuh," Brad said. "Come up to the hotel with me and we'll get somethin' to eat."

"No, Brad, not the hotel!" she said quickly, looking worried again. "You'd better go home. You can come back and see me at Fort Stockton, if you really want to."

"Ann, yuh ain't goin' to Fort Stockton. Don't yuh see what I'm tryin' to tell you?"

Her eyes were too bright to have been seeing anything else. They stood by the sideshow tent and he kissed her.

"Go over to the trailer, Brad—my trailer!" she breathed tremulously. "I'll see you there for just a minute, but you'd better go in and try not to let anybody see you. I have to check in the cash. Wait for me."

"I'll be waitin' and it'll seem mighty long," he said.

The music had stopped, but he could still hear it. The lights were being taken down, yet he remembered her shining eyes.

He turned the knob of the trailer door and stepped in to shut it quickly. There was a light inside.

When Brad faced away from the door, there sat Madden. A smile was on his oily face, his Panama tipped back in the same manner as his chair, the cigar in his teeth. There were two other men at the table. Madden waved the cigar.

"Hello, cowboy. We've been expectin' yuh. Sit down and buy in. It's jest a little poker game."

"Yeah," Brad said stiffly.

There were cards and chips and money on the table. The room was hazy with tobacco smoke, but dresses hung from a hook and the little built-in dressing table held feminine toilet articles. It was Ann's trailer, all right.

She had asked him if he gambled. She had talked to Madden and asked Brad if he played cards. And then she had sent him ahead to the trailer.

Madden was still smiling at him.

"Yeah," Brad said again.

He thought he shouldn't be so bull-headed. What he ought to do was tell Madden and the other two to go plumb straight to the devil and walk out, then tell Ann the same thing. She was a come-on girl and he had fallen for it, with seven hundred dollars in his pocket. He had fallen for *her* and that was worse!

He pulled up a chair. His teeth clenched so hard that his jaw muscles ached.

"You expected me, eh?" he asked Madden.

"Yeah. Saw yuh ride today, cowboy. Pete, lock the door, will yuh? That was some ride, son."

"Give me fifty bucks worth of blues," said Brad. "Yeah, but it wasn't anythin' compared to the ride I've just had."

* * * * *

FOR the first three evenings out on the ranch, the cows would come up to the edge of the mesquites and stare at the lights of the merry-go-round. It seemed mighty funny out there, but the music sounded good. There were miles and miles for the music to spread out in and grow soft.

The cowboys had a lot of fun. Shorty Williams rode past the merry-go-round once and roped a purple camel by the neck. When Jim Hendricks yelled at him, he let go of the rope without dallying it around the saddle-horn. Otherwise the camel probably would have had its head snapped off. Shorty's horse was trained to dig in all four hoofs when a rope was thrown.

Brad didn't say anything. He wasn't talking much those evenings. He just sat in the boat by himself, but he sat over on one side of the cushion and he wouldn't let anybody else change the music rolls. Everybody got a little tired of "Over the Waves," yet Brad really seemed to like it.

On the fourth day, Jim Hendricks went to town for the mail and some chuck, taking Brad's pickup. When he came back, the boys could tell he had found out something. He went straight to Brad, who was glowering on the porch.

"Look, son," Jim said, "if I didn't know yuh wasn't nobody's fool, I'd say yuh got plumb careless when yuh let yoreself be roped into a poker game with three strangers."

"Forget it," Brad growled.

"Yeah. Even so, when yuh seen they was tryin' to cold-deck yuh, yuh coulda called in the sheriff and jest took yore money back. There don't seem to be no call for what yuh done—beatin' up all three of them *hombres* and then draggin' that Madden up to the jail. And after yuh got him there—"

"I said forget it!"

"After yuh got him there," continued Jim fearlessly, "from what I hear he was willin' to fork over yore seven hundred bucks, jest to stay out of the hoosegow. Instead yuh made him sell yuh this contraption for the sum of seven hundred bucks. Even if the sheriff is dead set against crooked gamblin', he figgers yuh're loco, buyin' this outfit and lettin' Madden go free."

"I don't want to talk about it," Brad gritted. "Ever since I was a kid, I've had a hankerin' for a merry-go-round. Well, now I got one of my own and I can ride it all I want, free. Shorty, crank up that engine and put on 'Over the Waves'."

OLD Jim Hendricks snorted and returned to the pickup. He'd parked it by the barn, because he had some feed in the back. Brad went out and climbed on the merry-go-round as it started. He sat in the boat, as usual.

The other men got on, too. Shorty was hanging from the purple camel, trying to pick up his handkerchief with his teeth when the camel dipped, but he was too short. Everybody thought this was funny, except Brad. He didn't even smile.

Then Jim came back and got on. All of a sudden there was somebody else coming around the platform. She was a girl in a plain blue suit, with a funny little hat perched up on reddish gold hair. She came up behind Brad and said: "Fares, please. One dime, children a nickel."

Brad jumped out of the boat.

"Ann!" he yelled. "Where—how—"

Instantly she was in his arms. He kissed her before he remembered something that wiped the smile off his face. He dropped his arms. The music ran out. The engine kept chugging and everybody was quiet. Jim Hendricks straddled a dappled gray horse and grinned, pleased with himself.

"I thought you needed a ticket-taker," Ann explained. "Jim—Mr. Hendricks—said you probably did. He said you were operating the merry-go-round. Since Madden sold it, I've been out of a job."

She stopped, kind of embarrassed and not sure of herself. Brad just looked at her.

"That wasn't yore main job, Ann," he said. "How many other suckers did yuh steer into that trailer?"

"But I didn't!" she exclaimed, ready to cry in a minute. The words tumbled out and beat the tears. "I didn't, Brad! Madden wanted me to take you up to the hotel and see that you got drunk. I wouldn't. That's why I didn't want you to go to the hotel. But Madden was too smart for me. He saw I was—" The tears came and sobs wrenched her words. "He saw I was in love with you and I guess he knew I'd see you in the trailer."

Brad stood there like a wooden man among all those wooden horses.

"What the blazes are yuh standin' there like that for, son?" Jim Hendricks yelled. "Do somethin'!"

"Well, I can see you don't need me," Ann said. "I—Jim told me you were operating the merry-go-round and I thought that maybe— Well, good-by, Brad."

He jumped and caught her, lifted her into the boat and got in by her. Then he smiled.

"Put on 'Over the Waves'!" he ordered Shorty.

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Featured in the September Issue of Our Companion Magazine, POPULAR WESTERN—MEDICO OF GUN-FLAME BASIN, a Complete Action Novelet by LARRY A. HARRIS. 10c at All Stands!

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THE LETTER

By WALT WILSON

Author of "Carrion Canyon," "The Sheepman," etc.

LEFTY BRONKLIN had not meant to kill. Owlhooter though he was, he was not forgetting that a noose was at the end of the trail for killers, and there was no sense sticking his head into it if he didn't have to. But when he had seen this stranger riding up over the crest of the hill, he had been certain one of the posse had caught up with him. He had drawn iron and fired—too accurately!

"Kinda too bad for you, hombre," he muttered. "Cashed in yore chips in another man's game!"

Swiftly he emptied the dead man's pockets of cash. He smiled grimly. He could eat now. There also was a letter addressed to George Matters. Lefty ran through it casually and read:

> We sure will be glad to see our prodigal nephew again. The enclosed road-map will give you full directions as to how to get here. We'll make you right welcome. It's fine for us old folks, seeing you again after these eighteen long years. Glad you decided to settle down and inherit the ranch.
>
> John Matters,
> Bar Circle Ranch

A solution to all his problems. He would go to the Bar Circle, pretend to be George Matters, enjoy the fatted calf, and when the old folks' time came—or sooner—inherit the ranch! Hastily Lefty changed horses with the corpse, and got going.

When he reached the ranchhouse, he hallooed, and a whiskered, sturdy-looking man appeared.

"I'm George, yore nephew," shouted Lefty. "Gonna make me welcome? I come a long way."

The old man ran out, seemed flabbergasted for a moment, then grinned.

"Shore, come right in and I'll go for Ma. Mebbe yuh're hungry? Feed first, then we'll palaver. I'm plumb surprised to see yuh so soon. The excitement of it sorta tied my tongue. But come in. Yuh're shore a man now. Shore glad—"

The old man warmed up and started to chatter all manner of news. Lefty walked into the neat kitchen of the ranchhouse, was served with a meal.

"Go right ahead and eat," said old Matters. "I'll go fetch Ma. Must be down to the spring house fixin' the milk crocks."

Lefty fell to, and lit a quirly when he had finished. He was well fed, at ease for the first time in months. No sheriff's posse would run him down here. These old folks would swear he was their nephew.

Then in walked Matters—but no kindly old woman was with him. Instead, there was an hombre with a star, and a gun!

"Take him!" Matters snarled to the sheriff. "He musta done for George to have that letter. He'll hang soon's we find the body."

Lefty began to stammer denial.

"Got yuh dead to rights," growled thet sheriff, as he snapped the handcuffs. "Yuh never thought to look at the date on that letter. George has been here a year now, but he was so proud of that letter he always kept it with him."

A Killer Masquerade Proves a Grim Boomerang

Backtrail to Glory

By GUNNISON STEELE

Author of "Skull Valley Guns," "Gunpowder Burns Deep," etc.

Sherrod swung a fist to Gila Red's jaw

Blood Proves Thicker Than Water When Two Outlaw Killers Join in a Vicious Blackmail Scheme!

QUICK resentment stabbed at Tait Sherrod as a heavy rapping sounded on the door of the cottage where he lived with his crippled kid brother, Billy. It was nearly midnight. He had worked late at the bank, and he was tired. Besides, the racket might awaken Billy, for the button didn't sleep very well.

Instinctively, he clapped his hat back on his head and felt for his gunbutt as he went to the door. Two figures stood on the shadowy porch—a tall man, and a squat, thick man.

"Howdy, Tait," the tall man said. "Long time no see."

The faces of the men were in shadows, but Sherrod recognized that nasal voice, and suddenly he felt cold to the fingertips. He slid a little to one side, letting a shaft of murky light fall across the tall man's face—a thin, hard face with a scar on one cheek. It was Gila Red Gavin. The squat man had flat, bearded features and cold black eyes, and his name was Ike Scarbo.

"Hell, Tait, yuh don't seem glad to see us," Gila Red said complainingly.

"I'm not," Sherrod grunted. "What do you want?"

"A little confab, is all. Yuh invitin' us in?"

Sherrod hesitated. Then he stood aside, and the two came into the lighted room. They looked quickly, suspiciously about, with the air of men who are always with danger. They were dust-covered, and each wore two thonged-down guns. The brand of the out-trails was plain upon them.

"Yuh here alone?" Scarbo asked.

Sherrod nodded, trying not to show the resentment and misgivings he felt. He gestured toward chairs. He asked again, "What do you two want here?"

"Couldn't we just be visitin' an old friend?"

"I'm not your friend, and never was," Tait said bluntly. "Yeah, we all rode for the same outfit four years ago up in Montana, but that didn't make us friends."

"Is that all we did?" Scarbo asked softly.

TAIT SHERROD looked quickly toward a closed door connecting with another room. He hoped their voices wouldn't wake Billy up.

"So that's it?" he said brittlely. "No, that's not quite all. One day we three got drunk. I never did have much sense when I was plastered. So it wasn't hard for you two to convince me that it'd be a swell joke to stick-up an old skinflint storekeeper named Abe Tolley. We would give him a good scare, let him worry about losing his money for a day or two, then send it back—that's what you two said. But old Abe grabbed for a gun, and both of you shot and killed him. That sobered me—too late."

"Yeah, it was sorta too late." Gila Red grinned. The hair on his head and face and hands was rusty and bristly, giving him the appearance of an unkempt tomcat. "Yuh wouldn't touch any of the money, and yuh kept yore ridin' job. But soon after that me and Ike got into another scrape and had to run for it. We've been runnin' ever since. We been in this neck of the woods a coupla months now, and we got a swell hideout up in the hills. You got a nice place here. Yuh got a nice job at the bank, ain't yuh?"

"That's right," Sherrod admitted slowly. "Elk Springs is my old home town. I was born here. Soon after you two lined out, I got word about Dad and Mom being killed in an accident, and I came home. Their team got scared and ran away on a steep mountain road, and they went over a high bluff. They were killed, and my kid brother was crippled up. The fall did something to his spine, paralyzed his legs so he can't walk. He has to get about on crutches."

"That's bad," Scarbo sympathized. "Me and Red heard about the kid, and we decided to help yuh out."

"How could you help me?"

"Why, we heard yuh could send the button back East to a big specialist and get him fixed up good as new—if yuh had about four thousand dollars. Is that right?"

Sherrod nodded. "And I've almost got the four thousand saved up. Another year, and I'll have it. Then I'll send the kid back East and get his legs fixed. The bank may help me do it sooner."

"A year's a long time, especially for a button that can't run and play and ride like other kids," Scarbo pointed out. "Me and Red know yuh love that kid brother more than anything else in the world. So, why wait a year to get his legs fixed?"

"I said I may not have to—" began Sherrod.

"Hell, let's get to the point," Gila Red interrupted impatiently. "Tait, yuh don't have to wait for or borrow that money. You just collect some advance wages from the Elk Springs National!"

Tait Sherrod's pale, bitter-lined face went suddenly still and set. His eyes were like pools of blue ice.

"So that's it," he sneered. "You think I want the money bad enough to turn crooked for it. You think I'll help you rob the bank, betray the people who respect and trust me. Is that it?"

"That's right," Scarbo said. "What d'yuh say?"

Tait Sherrod suddenly drew his gun. "I say you're a couple of filthy skunks!" he said softly. "You've got just one minute to get out that door!"

Neither Scarbo nor Gila Red moved.

They looked at the gun, and they were grinning.

Scarbo shook his bullet head. "We ain't leavin', not just yet. Yuh won't use that gun, and yuh won't call the law. Yuh'll do just what we say, if yuh know what's good for yuh."

"If I don't, you'll see that the law finds out about me being mixed up in that murder robbery in Montana." Sherrod nodded jerkily. "It's an old blackmail game, and sometimes it works—but not this time! You could do that, and maybe I'd have to go to the pen for a few years. But you'll go, too. If you feel that way, go ahead. But get this! I'm not getting mixed up in any more of your rotten schemes."

SCARBO seemed grieved. "We didn't aim to do anything like that, kid. We ain't that dumb. We savvied yuh'd rather cut off an arm than be dishonest. Yuh think a lot of that kid brother of yores, don't yuh? It'd be tough if something was to happen to him."

That cold feeling touched Tait Sherrod again. "Meanin' just what?" he asked.

Scarbo shrugged. "Figure it out yoreself. Just don't blame us for anything that happens to him."

Sherrod's palms were moist, and globules of sweat stood out on his forehead. He'd seen these two men kill an unarmed old man. He knew they were as conscienceless as wolves.

"I ought to kill you both," he whispered harshly. "Hurt Billy, touch even one hair on his head, and I will!"

"Then it'd be too late," Scarbo said easily. "Yuh know us, Sherrod. Yuh know we ain't foolin'. Want to hear more?"

The gun muzzle sagged. They knew his soft spot, the only one. He'd go through hell to save crippled Billy an unnecessary moment's pain or worry, and they knew it. His mind was reeling, and there was a heavy, baffled feeling in his heart. Slowly he reholstered his weapon.

"It'll be easy," Ike Scarbo was saying persuasively. "Folks here think yuh're just about what the doctor ordered; they wouldn't suspect you of anything crooked. We've found out that you and old Jim Plain, the president, are the only ones who work in the bank. And we've found out that Jim Plain aims to go up to Austin day after tomorrow on some business. Yuh'll be there alone. So just about closin' time in the evenin' me and Red'll happen up, goin' in the back door from the alley so nobody'll see us. We'll tie yuh up, and clean out the bank vault.

"Yuh'll likely have to stay tied up for a while till yuh're missed and folks start lookin' for yuh. We'll gag yuh to make it look real. That'll give us plenty time to make a clean getaway to the hills. Yuh can tell a bunch of lies about how the robbers got the drop on you, and about how they looked. Then, after the fuss dies down, yuh ride up to the hideout and get yore split. Yuh'll have plenty to send the kid back East, with a bunch of greenbacks left over. Now what do yuh say?"

Sherrod doubled his fist, and his voice was hoarse with baffled rage. "No! I—I won't do it. That'd make me just as rotten as you two snakes are. Get out, before I kill you!"

A quick snarl drove the smirking grin from Scarbo's flat, dark features. Then he and Gila Red Gavin got abruptly to their feet, drawing their weapons. Instantly Sherrod swung a fist to Gila Red's jaw. The man staggered back. Then:

"Okay, we'll get out," he said. "But we'll be back, don't forget that. If yuh change yore mind, come to the foot of Sentinel Peak, ride due north three miles till yuh come to a shallow canyon, then head west up the canyon a coupla miles till yuh come to a shack back under the walls."

"I don't give a damn where yore hideout is—" Sherrod began hotly.

"Yuh might change yore mind," Gila Red cut in coldly, significantly. "Yuh ain't that dumb. Yuh'll do like we say, or that crippled kid might take sick and die. Or he might just disappear. If yuh *do* change yore mind, just ride up to the hideout tomorrow night and let us know."

TAIT Sherrod said nothing. He just sat there, white-lipped with bitter fury as Scarbo and Gila Red stalked from the room. He heard the grind of their bootheels growing fainter on the cinder path outside, and he stared dazedly at the gun in his hand. His hand was shaking so that the weapon almost fell to the floor. He'd come very close to killing Scarbo and Gila Red in cold blood. Now, suddenly, he wished he had.

But they were gone, and only the sinister threat their presence had brought remained. The echo of Gila Red's cold voice was still there:

"Yuh'll do like we say, or that crippled kid might take sick and die. Or he might just disappear."

Tait Sherrod placed the gun on the desk, tip-toed to the closed bedroom door, opened it and went in to where Billy lay asleep. A ribbon of light fell across the bed, revealing the lad's tousled dark hair and his thin, intelligent face. The blankets hid his dead, useless legs. Billy's crutches leaned against the bed.

Billy was eleven. He was always cheerful when his brother was around. But Sherrod couldn't miss the wistful light of longing in Billy's dark eyes when he saw other boys going hiking and swimming and playing ball. Billy's only activity was riding his pony—when he had somebody to saddle the pony and help him on. More than anything, Tait Sherrod wanted Billy to be like other kids. Certainly, he didn't want anything to happen to this boy.

If he played in with Scarbo and Gila Red, he wouldn't have to worry. Sherrod started guiltily, rubbing a hand across his eyes. He'd been teller in the Elk Springs bank over two years, and such thoughts had never entered his mind before. He was fiercely proud of his honesty, of the fact that folks trusted him.

Billy's eyes opened suddenly. He looked puzzledly up at his brother's drawn face.

"Is somethin' wrong, Tait?" he asked.

"Everything's fine," Sherrod lied. "What could be wrong?"

"I thought I heard voices in the front room a little while ago. I was afraid something had happened at the bank, like it did a few weeks ago when somebody tried to dynamite the vault."

"Just a couple of friends. They saw the light in my room and stopped to talk a few minutes. You go on back to sleep, kid."

"Sure," said Billy obediently. "G'night."

"G'night, kid," said Sherrod, patting the boy's hand.

He went out and closed the door. He undressed and went to bed, but it was a long time before he went to sleep. Seeing Billy hadn't reassured him. The premonition of evil remained, like a ghastly nightmare. He tossed restlessly, staring into the inky darkness, trying to tell himself that Scarbo and Gila Red were bluffing. Tomorrow, in the white light of day, he'd see how foolish the whole thing was.

But it hadn't paled to foolishness the next morning. He knew that Scarbo and Gila Red weren't bluffing. His face was pale and his fingers bungling as he went about his work at the bank.

Kindly, paunchy old Jim Plain noticed it. "Something on your mind, Tait?" he asked.

Sherrod shook his head. "No," he lied, "I just didn't sleep well last night."

"You've been working pretty hard lately," declared the banker. "Soon as I get back from Austin, maybe you'd better take a few days off and go up in the hills and do trout fishing. You could take Billy with you. He loves fishing, don't he?"

"Sure," Sherrod agreed. "Maybe that'd help."

He cashed checks and worked at figures, almost without seeing them. If it were just himself he'd know what to do. During those few years of roaming after leaving home he'd been pretty wild; he knew how to use a gun. But now an uneasy sense of bafflement burned within him. The threat of danger wasn't to him; it was to plucky, crippled Billy.

He knew it was ridiculous even to consider acceding to what Scarbo and

Gila Red wanted. And yet, what else was there to do? If he refused, Billy might be tortured, or killed. The two renegades, he knew, were perfectly capable of doing either. From past experience, he knew that they were vengeful and cruel. And he didn't dare appeal for help under the circumstances.

ABOUT mid-afternoon Sherrod looked out the bank window and saw Billy coming along the street. The button's arms were strong, and he made pretty good time on his crutches. He hated for folks to pity him. He came into the bank and stood outside the cage where Tait was sorting bundles of banknotes.

"You all right, Tait?" he asked.

Sherrod grinned. "Sure, I'm all right. Why wouldn't I be all right, halfpint?"

"Oh, I dunno," Billy said wisely. "You didn't eat hardly anything, and you looked worried. Maybe I could help."

The older brother reached through the window and tweaked the lad's ear. "Now, you stop worrying about me. And you shouldn't have come all the way down here; you know how it tires you out."

"I made it fine." Billy grinned. "Besides, I'm on my way down to Jube Tanner's hardware store. He said I could help him sell things again this afternoon."

"A lot of help you'd be!" chafed Sherrod.

"I dunno—Jube must think so. He gives me a quarter for wrapping packages. I'm saving it up, to buy you some new boots." He looked wide-eyed at the stacks of banknotes in the cage. "Holy gee, that's pretty near all the money in the world, ain't it?"

Sherrod smiled as he shook his head, and the youngster went on.

"If we had that much money, I could have my legs fixed right away, couldn't I? Then I could go hikin' and swimmin' with the other fellows. Wouldn't that be swell?" Then his eyes grew earnest and sober. "But I tell you what, Tait—I'd rather stay like I am the rest of my life than be dishonest and take money that honest folks had worked hard for. Isn't that the way you feel?"

Sherrod was startled. He nodded silently, his face gray. "In a little while we'll have enough money to have your legs fixed, halfpint," he promised.

"That'll be swell," Billy said. "But I get along fine. I do pretty near anything I want to. Well, I've got to get on down to Jube's store."

He went out, and Tait Sherrod sat there, the chill deepening in his heart. He felt numb, bewildered. A gent who would let harm come to a plucky little tike like that would be a skunk. He'd be just as big a skunk to take money from folks who trusted him. He didn't know what to do.

As the sun sank lower, and time for closing the bank came, Sherrod's face got grayer and more haggard. Gila Red had said, "If yuh change yore mind, just ride up to the hideout and let us know." And then he thought about what Billy had said this afternoon. "I'd rather stay like I am the rest of my life than to be dishonest.

Sherrod walked as one in a stupor as he went from the bank to the white cottage. He prepared supper, and he and Billy ate in silence. If the boy was aware of the turmoil inside the man he pretended not to notice.

After they'd eaten, and lights had begun to glow in Elk Springs' windows, Sherrod spoke casually. "I'm goin' for a little ride, alone. I won't be gone long, but don't wait up for me."

Billy nodded and got busy with a book. Sherrod affectionately tousled his head and went out. He saddled his big dun and rode out of town. He often went for rides at night after being cooped up all day, so maybe Billy wouldn't suspect anything. His six-shooter was strapped on under his coat.

Out of town, he rode slowly across the dark plain. The turmoil in his mind, instead of subsiding, was boiling with increased fury. The wind was cool against his face, but cooled his thoughts not at all. Several miles away, upthrust against the night sky,

he could see the foothills. He rode aimlessly for an hour, trying to decide what to do. A white moon soared into the sky, showing the pine-clad hills startlingly close, and then Tait Sherrod realized what he'd subconsciously known all along.

He was riding toward Scarbo's and Gila Red's hideout.

HE knew that, whatever he decided, that rendezvous was unavoidable. Tonight it had to be settled; he had to decide on one of three courses. He could play in with the outlaws' plan, and let them rob the bank. It would probably work, and nobody would suspect him of crookedness. With his part of the bank money he could send Billy East to get his legs fixed and remove that threat to his well being. But Tait Sherrod knew it wouldn't end there. Scarbo and Gila Red would be back for further blackmail, and the grim threat of violence would still hover over Billy.

On the other hand, he could tell the sheriff what had happened, and help capture Gila Red and Scarbo when they showed up at the bank tomorrow. But that wouldn't settle anything, either. Scarbo and Gila Red would go to the pen or the hangman's noose, but he'd likely go too, for his part in that old robbery up in Montana. That would leave Billy alone. And, some way, Scarbo or Gila Red might manage to carry out their sinister threat to harm the youngster. So long as Ike Scarbo and Gila Red lived, Billy Sherrod would be in deadly peril. Third. . . .

Tait Sherrod lifted his eyes suddenly to the dark hills. His face was gray and set in the moonlight, but his mind no longer ached and reeled with indecision. Crystal-clear, his course lay before him, and now it seemed incongruous that he hadn't seen it all along. Scarbo and Gila Red had to die; that way alone could Billy be free.

He put spurs to the dun and rode up into the shadowy foothills. Straight ahead, like a dark, pointing finger, Sentinel Peak was etched against the silvery sky. He felt almost exultant as he rode. Within the space of a few seconds he had seemed to emerge from inky darkness into bright sunshine. The solid feel of the gun against his thigh was comforting.

Nothing would turn him from the course he'd decided upon, not even death. He expected to die, but he'd leave Billy with a clean heritage. During the last three years he'd lost touch with a gun. He couldn't expect to face Scarbo and Gila Red and kill them without himself dying. All he asked was the certainty that the two who menaced Billy died. Somehow, he knew that whatever happened he'd live that long.

The hills grew rougher. Sentinel Peak towered almost straight above him, silent and ghostly. He reached its base, and rode due north for about three miles, coming to the shallow canyon that Gila Red had mentioned. He found a broken place in the walls and urged the dun along the canyon bed. Despite a queer impatience inside him, he felt oddly calm, not at all like he'd imagined a man about to die would feel.

Suddenly he jerked the dun to a halt. A light glowed ahead, a bright star in the gloom back under the walls at one side of the canyon. He could see the dim outlines of a shack. He could see nothing else, for no moonlight struck the shack or the immediate vicinity; he could hear no sound, except the pawing of a horse against wood somewhere near.

Tait Sherrod dismounted, tying his horse in a thicket. Then, careful to make no sound, he circled and got behind the shack, advancing stealthily until he was within thirty feet of the dilapidated cabin. There was a back door to the shack, hanging half off the hinges; the front door was wide.

A startled voice inside the shack said, "What the hell!"

Abruptly Sherrod stopped again, thinking he'd been discovered. He crouched, gun in hand. He heard movement inside the shack, but nobody appeared at the door.

Then another voice that he knew belonged to Gila Red, demanded,

"What the devil you doin' here?"

And still another voice—a brave young voice that sent swift amazement and fear rushing over Tait Sherrod. "I'll show you what I'm doin'. I aim to kill you both!"

BILLY'S voice! Impossible as it seemed, there was no mistaking it. Crippled Billy, unable to walk, here in the hills, ten miles from home. Tait Sherrod felt icy cold, but he could feel sweat running over his face. His limbs seemed weighted with lead as he forced himself to move toward the back door of the cabin. The door seemed miles away, instead of only a few feet.

"Yuh're Tait Sherrod's kid brother, ain't you?" he heard Scarbo say.

"That's just who I am!" Billy's voice was high-pitched, but not frightened. "And I aim to—"

Scarbo laughed. "Red, we're playin' in luck! Now Tait Sherrod'll *have* to play ball."

Sherrod reached the sagging back door. He couldn't see Scarbo and Gila Red, but he could see Billy standing in the front doorway, leaning against the door-jamb, crutches braced under his armpits. The youngster was bareheaded, and his thin face was pale and set. He had a package in his left hand.

By some miracle the boy had managed to catch and saddle his pony, get onto its back and ride ten miles through the night. But why was he here?

"No, Tait's not goin' to play ball with you, either," Billy was saying shrilly. "Oh, I know what it's all about. You two skunks got Tait into some trouble up in Montana, and you're threatening to tell on him. You think he'll help you rob Jim Plain's bank to keep you from hurtin' me. I reckon he would, too. But Tait ain't crooked, and I'd rather be dead than see him break the law. If he was to help rob that bank, it'd be my fault, because he'd be doin' it to help me. So I aim to keep him from doin' it by blowin' you two snakes to Jericho!"

Scarbo and Gila Red guffawed.

"Simmer down, younker," Scarbo said roughly. "Come on in here before I shoot them crutches out from under yuh."

Gila Red was more tantalizing. "Come on in, kid," he said, "and tell us how yuh aim to do them awful things. Yuh ain't got no gun, have yuh?"

"No," Billy cried, snatching the wrapping from his package, "but I got this!"

Tait Sherrod went numb with horror as he saw that the boy held three sticks of dynamite tied together and fixed with percussion caps. The boy must have slipped the explosive from Jube Tanner's stock when the hardware man hadn't been looking.

Surprise and terror must have paralyzed Scarbo and Gila Red, for there was a moment's stark silence in the hut. Then, his own paralytic bonds broken, Sherrod hurled himself desperately around the shack and at the front doorway behind his reckless young brother.

"Billy! Billy!" he shouted. "Wait, boy! That stuff'll—"

He had no time to say more. Coming out of their horrified trance, both outlaw killers were drawing their guns and backing swiftly away. Sherrod took a desperate chance with all their lives in that moment as he launched himself at his brother in a dive which carried the aroused and angry lad out of the doorway and off to one side of the shack. The shock of the tackle jarred the dynamite from Billy's hand, and it dropped to the threshold with a thud.

But the three sticks landed right side up and, thanks to the peculiarity of dynamite, they didn't explode. Sherrod and the lad rolled over and over away from the cabin.

GILA RED, startled out of his wits at the sudden appearance of Tait Sherrod, cut loose wildly with his six-shooter. The second shot hit squarely on a detonator cap. There was a white burst of flame and a thunderous roar which all but ruptured Sherrod's eardrums. He felt himself and the lad he was hugging lifted as if by giant, unseen hands and flung

crashingly against the corral fence. There was a mighty gust of wind, and then debris from the vanished shack was flailing all around them, burying them there in the shelter of the corral fence.

He lay there a few seconds, stunned, sheltering Billy from the flying wood fragments. He tried to see, but it was dark. And where there should have been silence after the terrific blast, a dull, rushing sound beat at his ears. The fence had miraculously protected from the worst of the blast.

Tait Sherrod reeled to his feet. He swooped Billy's inert figure into his arms and ran stumblingly, blindly, through the dark, exerting every ounce of his strength in the effort. The low sound behind him increased to a grinding roar. Fragments of shale and boulders tumbled about his legs.

Gradually the confused sounds died, and he stopped and placed Billy on the ground. His flight had carried them into the moonlight. Billy was stirring, trying to sit up.

Sherrod shook him gently, asked, "Kid, are you all right?"

"I—I'm fine," Billy said dazedly. "W-what happened?"

"One of those skunks shot your dynamite off. The explosion blew the cabin to pieces," Sherrod told him. "It shook some rocks loose up on the canyon walls and started a slide. The slide buried the cabin under tons of rock."

"Them jaspers—did they—"

"They're still in the cabin—what's left of it. Kid, why in heaven's name did you come out here?"

Billy started crying softly. "I—I just wanted to help you. I knew what they were trying to make you do. I just pretended to be asleep last night when you came into my room. I'd heard everything they said to you. I knew you'd likely do what they wanted to keep them from hurting me, so I decided to do somethin' about it. I got the dynamite at Jube Tanner's store when Jube wasn't lookin', and carried it home and fixed the caps.

"After you left tonight I went out to the corral and caught my pony. I didn't have much trouble, except crawlin' up on the corral gate and gettin' into the saddle. I'd heard that redhaired gent tell you how to get here."

"And that dynamite—didn't you know it would kill you, along with the others?" Sherrod asked slowly.

"Sure, I knew that. But that was all right, if it would get you out of the jam you were in. I've already been too much trouble. And now—"

"Now our troubles are about over," Tait Sherrod said. "Now that year we may have to wait for your new legs won't seem near so long, will it?"

"It won't seem like hardly any time," Billy said, and grinned.

Tait Sherrod lifted the slight figure in his arms and strode toward the thicket where he'd left his horse, feeling exuberant and humble at the same time. Now he knew that miracles *did* happen.

Chris McLean Makes a No-Gun Vow Just Before the Shooting Starts

IN

PEACEABLE MAN

By THOMAS LAMAR

AN EXCITING COMPLETE ACTION NOVELET

COMING NEXT ISSUE

A New Department for Readers Conducted by

FOG HORN CLANCY

America's Most Famous Rodeo Expert and Handicapper

HI, pals of the old top rail and the shady nooks of the range, we are back in the saddle again, ready for another jaunt along the trails of the West, ready for more "Trail Talk" where we do our best to tell you authentic stories of the West, of the early day trails of the wide open spaces.

Many of these stories have oft been told, but they never grow old, and will live as long as will the spirit of the West, and that will never die.

Now and then we run across an old timer (there are a few still left) who took an active part in the taming or building of the West, or we encounter a son of an old pioneer of the early West, and from them we get stories, some of which have not often been in print, and these we try to pass along to you, hoping that they will furnish interesting and enjoyable reading.

The fellow from the West, when he comes to the sea shore (if he ever gets a chance) if he takes a boat and gets out far enough on the ocean or any body of water so that he cannot see land, gets a great thrill out of the venture, and likewise the person of the East who

Fog Horn Clancy

lives in the crowded districts where there is hardly room to park a car between houses, where there are so many people and houses that one can see little of anything else, also gets a great kick out of a visit to the West. Especially if able to get out in the wide open country where a human being or a house is not visible as far as the eye can see.

So it is that Easterners get a thrill in traveling West, and Westerners get a thrill traveling East. It's a really great country.

My First Trip to New York

Although it has been many years ago, I can still remember my first trip to New York. It was unbelievable in my younger days that I would ever be on a train, and that train on a boat. My mind at the time could not handle a mental picture of a boat big enough and strong enough to hold up a whole train, and carry that train across a body of water; and as for the tall buildings, which I had heard about, but could not believe were so tall, I remember well that the second day in New York my neck was sore from looking up at the top of the skyscrapers the day before.

So you Easterners now may know that there are just as many thrills in the East for the Westerner as there are in the West for the Easterner.

Another thing that Easterners may take pride in when they hear some one telling of the virtues and bravery of some Western pioneer is that either that pioneer or his ancestors came from the East. There are many thrilling stories that could be told of the Eastern pioneers; but the West being newer and later, and the deeds of its pioneers so thrilling, there are more fascinating stories told of the West and its

pioneers than there are of any other section of our great country.

"Boot Hill"

Take for instance the coinage of the words "Boot Hill." This phrase was coined in the West, and although there was bloodshed in the East during the early days of the colonies, boot hills were unknown, and the name was unknown. It remained for the West to see men, mad and in eager pursuit of gold, rushing headlong here and there, in their race Westward getting a few lengths ahead of law and civilization. They killed one another upon the slightest provocation, killed them so quickly that they had no time to remove their boots, and with the same speed buried them in shallow graves with their boots still upon their feet. That was when the boot hills came into being.

The first boot hill, and the one so far as we know from which the name sprang, was what might be termed a military boot hill and it contained the bodies of one hundred and eighty-three men. Brave men they were too, men whose passing left one of the prettiest pieces of history ever written, for they were the men who defended the Alamo in the battle for Texas independence. Although there were more than four thousand of Santa Ana's men against them, they repelled charge after charge until there was not one brave defender left alive.

The boot hill of Dodge City, Kansas, however, is the first to measure up to the full meaning of the name, where men died by gunfire and were, with little or no ceremony, planted in graves without caskets and with their boots still upon them. That boot hill contained the bodies of many brave men. True, many of them were outlaws, but they had unflinchingly faced the gunfire of faster gunmen, and the speed of the other gunman was their ticket to boot hill.

Wild Bill Hickok

One man who contributed much to the boot hills of the West, and whose name will live on and on, was Wild Bill Hickok.

In his prime Wild Bill Hickok was a very picturesque character, about six feet and one inch in height, stalwart, lithe, with a slow drawling voice, but quick of action, eyes of steel grey, sweeping mustache and dark brown hair that hung almost to his shoulders. He moved with precision and catlike grace. Two forty-fives were always at his hips; there was a hint of the cavalier in his drooping sombrero and his ornately patterned boots.

James Butler Hickok was the name by which he was known until one day in December in the early sixties, when the McCandless gang of outlaws tried to drive the horses off from the Rock Creek station of the Overland Stage on the plains of Southwestern Nebraska near the Kansas boundary.

The McCandless gang were not trying to steal the horses. They did not call it stealing. They were simply going to take them by force and gun-power.

These stage stations were usually manned by two or three men who were supposed to look after the stock of the stage company and defend the station and the company's property against marauding Indians and outlaws.

Battling Outlaws

There were ten of the desperadoes and Hickok, who was scarcely more than a boy then, was alone in the little sod house, for Doc Brinck, his partner, was off hunting that afternoon. Hickok watched the approach of the outlaws from a lonely cubicle where he and Brinck passed their days as station keepers. They rode up through the cottonwoods by the creek. Bill McCandless stepped from his horse and boldly strode to the corral bars.

"I'll shoot the first man who lays hands on those bars," Hickok called. The bandits answered with a volley of lead, and their leader laughed as he dragged the topmost railing from its place, but the laugh had hardly been heard even by his companions before he was dead.

Seeing that there was one against them who seemed unafraid of the odds against him, the rifles of the others of the gang rained lead against the sod walls and slugs buzzed like angry wasps through the window. Hickok killed one more of the gang by the corral and a third member who had crept up behind the wooden well curb. The seven who were left retired to the cottonwood trees by the creek to hold council. They determined to rush the building and batter down the door.

When they came forth bearing a dead tree-trunk between them Hickok shot two more of them. And then the timber crashed against the flimsy door; the splintered boards flew across the room, and the sod walls trembled to the shock. Hickok dropped his rifle and drew his revolver as he leaped to meet them in what must have looked like his final battle.

Hand to Hand

Jim McCandless and another of the gang pitched forward across the threshhold before they could get inside to where they could use their rifles to an advantage. With the odds ten to one against him at the start, the coolness and accurate shooting of Young Hickok was becoming too much for the outlaw gang. The battle was now a hand to hand encounter. Hickok ducked under the muzzle of one weapon and its flame seared his long hair as he swung for the bearer's mid-section with all the weight of his body behind the blow. Whirling with the swiftness of a fighting cat he ground the heel of his boot into the fallen outlaw's face, threw down upon another who had leveled a shotgun. Revolver and shotgun spoke at the same instant; the outlaw fell dead, and Hickok staggered back with eleven buckshot wounds in his body.

The other three outlaws were upon him before he recovered his balance. He felt the sting of their bowie-knives against his ribs as they bore him down on the bed. Murderous fingers closed upon his wind-

pipe. He seized the arm in his two hands and twisted it, as one would twist a stick, until the bones snapped. He struggled to his feet, and although bleeding freely from knife wounds, in the mad frenzy of battle had strength enough to hurl the two bandits who were left across the room.

Back they came, crouching, their knives gleaming through the gunsmoke in the room—only two left of the ten bandits who were in at the start of the battle! And although they had seen eight of their number go down before this fighting son of the plains, they were still intent upon wiping out the lone fighting demon. His own bowie-knife was in his hand now, and he stabbed the foremost through the throat. Then the other fled. Hickok stumbled out through the door after him, and Doc Brinck came riding back from his hunting expedition just in time to lend his rifle to his partner, who insisted that he was able to finish the one remaining member of the gang.

How He Got His Nickname

When Doc Brinck handed Young Hickok his rifle, although the loss of blood was causing a weakness to creep over Hickok, he shut his teeth against the pain of his wounds and lined his sights on the last of his enemies; that final shot was not so true as its predecessors; the outlaw did not die until several days later.

When the Eastbound stage pulled up that afternoon the driver and passengers found the long-haired young station keeper in a deep swoon, with eleven buckshot and thirteen knife wounds in his body. They took him aboard and carried him to Manhattan, Kansas. Six months later he had fully recovered, and found that in the telling of the story of the raid on the stage station he had been nicknamed Wild Bill, and from that time on the name Wild Bill Hickok was famous.

How many men he killed is a mooted question, but there were none who questioned his fairness in gun battles. He was a likable fellow, who demanded and received the respect due a man. He introduced the quick draw to a large portion of the western frontier, and many who sought his life for the sake of the fame it would bring them, died with their weapons in their hands.

A Swift-Thinking Trick

In Abilene, Kansas, where he was for several years town marshal, one of those who wanted to have the notoriety of killing the famous gunman caught him unawares as he was rounding a corner. Wild Bill complied with the order to throw up his hands and stood, rigid, expressionless, while the would-be assassin, emulating the custom of the Indians, tried to torture him by picturing the closeness of the end of his life. The aspirant to fame was in the midst of his description when Hickok seemingly looked past him with widening eyes and with a voice that depicted horror said, "My God, don't kill him from behind!" The outlaw allowed his eyes to waver for a fraction of a second, but that was far too long, and he fell with a bullet hole in his forehead.

On another occasion a cowboy who had come up the trail with a herd to Abilene got drunk and began whooping it up, saying that he was a wolf and it was his night to howl. He was told that the city marshal, Wild Bill Hickok, would not stand for his wolf howls, but he went right on remarking that no city marshal could stop him from doing anything. He transferred his howling to the street, but just at that time was accosted by the city marshal who told him to forget that he was such a great he-wolf and cease the howling. The cowboy started to tell the marshal that he would brook no interference with his night howling and in all probability intended after making the talk to draw his gun and show that he was determined to go on with his spree. *(Continued on page 111)*

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NOW ON SALE AT ALL STANDS

Dude Lane Plays Risky Cards to Redress an Old Wrong—and Draws Spades for a Scoundrel's Grave!

He struggled to one knee, sent a shot through the haze

QUICK-TRIGGER SHOWDOWN

By LIONEL E. I. DAY

Author of "Gun Fever at Gaucho," "Snake Eyes at Seven Up," etc.

DUDE LANE reined up in the shelter of a shade oak, but not to admire the scenery. Broken Bow was ugly as sin in the November rain. Its paintless, false-fronted buildings dripped drearily, and its main street was as muddy as a hog wallow.

There had been trouble enough in Dude Lane's young life without riding into more of it, and whatever was going on in the livery stable across the street was no business of his. Yet, as he watched the two beefy rousters slug the young cowprod into unconsciousness, his jaw muscles corded slowly. The cowprod was putting up a game fight, but he was outnumbered

and outweighed. A bone-splintering blow landed by one of the heavyweights sent him slithering into the street at that moment. He lay face down, without moving.

Dude tensed suddenly, his sharply chiselled features turning to stone. The rousters were unsheathing their guns! It was one thing to keep out of a private fight, however unfair, but cold blooded murder was different! Almost without thinking, Dude levelled his silver-mounted Peacemaker across his pommel. It blasted twice. Mud splattered up into the startled faces of the gun-wranglers as the slugs dug into the street at their feet.

"I don't usually buy chips in another man's game," Dude said sharply, "but I don't like the color of the cards you're about to deal!"

Their guns swivelled towards him menacingly, then wavered as they took in the details of his rig. Except for the fact that he was soaked to the skin, Dude Lane looked like a cattle baron. An expression of grudging respect crept into the rousters' eyes as they noted his eighty-dollar Stetson, hand-carved boots and saddle, and glittering silver spurs.

"Tobe and me was just aimin' to scare the young fool a little," the taller of the two mumbled as he holstered his gun.

"He's past scarin'." Dude pointed out sarcastically. "And I'd take it kindly if you gents would disappear sudden."

"Yuh're slicin' off a heap of trouble for y'rself, pilgrim!" Tobe growled, "Ed Ormsby's all yours if you want him—only yuh been warned!"

Dude watched silently as the two moved off down the street. The young cowpoke stirred and groaned softly. Dude looked down at him with a frown of annoyance. He had business in town that left him no time for playing nursemaid to deserving but incautious cowprods. Two days ago he had heard that Tony Frisell was in Broken Bow. The very thought of Tony Frisell sent shivers of hate coursing along his spine!

BUT Dude Lane wasn't yet so hardened that he could allow a fellow human to lie suffering in a freezing rain. With a sigh of resignation he dismounted and heaved the mud-splattered cowprod over his shoulder. A doctor's shingle, swinging in the wind a short way up the street, caught his eye, and he headed toward it with his mount in tow.

After he had left young Ed Ormsby in the sawbones' care, he turned in at an eating place. A grinning Chinese cook took his order, and he pulled a chair up to the pot-bellied stove, thankful for the warmth after his hours of riding in the rain. The old Chinaman set a slab of steak to fry, then came over and stood by Dude's side.

"You catch all same trouble soon, I think," he said, his face cracking into a cheerful, wrinkle-wreathed grin.

Dude looked up at him, sensing suddenly that the old man had a lot of wisdom stored away in his almost bald head.

"Why?" he asked with a laugh.

"You all same play along dynamite. Me catch look-see you help fella Ohmsbly. They catch you, they fix you quick I think."

"Who'll do the fixin'?" Dude asked, his dark eyes glittering with interest.

"You see. You watch out, I think."

The Chinese bobbed back to his cooking, clucking to himself like a setting hen. The door opened then. Dude bounced to his feet and waited with his hand hooked in his cartridge belt. Ed Ormsby stalked in, admitting a gust of damp rain. He smiled wryly at Dude through a maze of adhesive tape.

"I came to buy you a dinner, mister. That's about all my life is worth in these parts."

Dude shrugged with careful uncon-

cern. "I never turned down an offer like that, Ormsby."

The old Chinese looked nervously from one to the other as Ormsby pulled a chair up to Dude's table. Dude studied the young man covertly as they ate. He was above average height, gray-eyed, with sharply chiselled features and a determined mouth. But what interested Dude most was Ormsby's bitter, half-beaten, half-defiant look. He guessed that the young cowprod had been going through plenty of grief lately.

"Why don't yuh go burn some powder, friend?" he asked bluntly. "If two loud-mouthed rannihans had just busted the front of my face, I'd sure aim to blow daylight through 'em!"

Ormsby flushed and turned his eyes away. "I don't mind fightin', but committin' suicide is plumb foolish. Every man who's tried to force Frisell's gun-hand has been found floatin' face down in the creek next day."

"Yuh said Frisell," Dude echoed harshly.

"Yeah. Tony Frisell. He just won everything I own in a stud game, and when I accused him of usin' marked cards, he had his gun wranglers give me the goin' over you stopped."

"Why don't yuh tell the sheriff that?"

"What's the use?" Ormsby asked hopelessly, "I can't prove nothin'. Sheriff Pickett's been tryin' for months to get the goods on Frisell, but he's too slick. I was a fool to ever get mixed up with him. My ranch and every cent I had in the world is Frisell's now. There's nothin' left for me to do but move on and make a new start somewheres else."

DUDE nodded slowly. He knew Frisell's methods. And he knew, too, what a bitter mistake young Ormsby would be making if he skulked off like a kicked cur.

"I did that—once," he said in a low, bitter voice. "And I can tell yuh it's

[*Turn page*]

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better to stay and die fightin' than to high-tail it to other parts where yuh'll have your fightin' to do anyhow. Frisell's breed of polecat forages wherever there are honest fools who're too easy-goin' to call them by their stripe."

"Are you claimin' I'm yellow?" Ormsby blazed, with red staining his youthful features.

"Nope. Not yellow—just wrong. Where does this Frisell hombre hang out?"

"Over at Cowboy's Haven Hotel. He owns that, too. Got it the same way he got my outfit—with his crooked cards. He runs his gamblin' set-up in a back room."

Dude smiled thinly. "The Cowboy's Haven is goin' to get a new payin' guest. I'm sorta hankerin' to set in on one of Frisell's games."

"After all I been tellin' you about his crooked cards? He'll trim yuh and turn yuh over to his gunnies the same as he did me!"

"Maybe," Dude admitted. "But all the same, I'm takin' a few fistfuls of Frisell's talkin' cards. Meantime, maybe yuh'd like to do somethin' about gettin' your ranch back?"

Ormsby straightened and his gray eyes shone with a new, fierce light.

"Show me even a Chinaman's chance an' I'll side with yuh to hell and gone!"

They spoke for a few minutes more. Then Ormsby shook his head dubiously.

"Yuh can count on me, but yuh sure picked a man-size job for yourself. By tomorrow we'll be fishin' yore carcass outta the creek, if yuh ain't a whole lot slicker and faster than Frisell is."

The rain had stopped, but the sky was still like a sheet of lead as Dude Lane strode up the street toward the ramshackle hotel. He knew he was about to take a desperate gamble. If he lost, the price would be his life. But all he wanted was half an hour of uninterrupted time, face to face with Frisell. After that, he didn't care what happened!

A sleepy-eyed oldster rose from behind the hotel desk when he entered. He eyed Dude curiously, taking in the details of his bedraggled but expensive outfit.

"Lookin' for a room, stranger?" he croaked, scoring a bulls-eye on a battered brass spittoon.

Dude Lane nodded casually. "Lookin' for a room and a little excitement."

"Reckon yuh'll git 'em both here, young feller!" the oldtimer cackled, shoving the register across the desk.

As he held the pencil poised over the soiled ledger page, a voice sounded behind him.

"We're mighty particular about our guests in this here hotel!"

LANE jerked around and found himself facing Laakso and Stubbs, the two beefy buckeroos who had beaten Ormsby. He smiled coldly, letting his hand drop to within easy reach of his silver-mounted gun.

"I'm listenin'."

"We don't like the friends yuh pick," Laakso growled.

"Meanin' Ormsby?"

"You called it, pilgrim. We'd admire for yuh to ride for other diggin's."

Dude laughed shortly. "I kinda like it here. Maybe yuh know somebody who'll stop me from stayin'?"

"Yeah, us!" Laakso blustered. "Git, yuh fancy saddle tramp!"

Dude's balled fist drove into Laakso's mouth with a resounding crack. The big rouster toppled backward, stretching his length on the floor. Then with a bullish roar, he surged to his feet. Both of the rousters closed in on Dude, and the lobby loafers formed a howling ring around them. Rock-hard fists thudded into Dude's ribs. He feinted, sidestepped, and squirmed his way to the center of the room, trying to avoid the punishing blows.

Three times his own ready fists drove like mule-kicks into Laakso's face. The big man hurriedly backed out of range, with blood streaming from his cut lips. Stubbs closed in,

trying to knee Dude. He got a stunning right hook to the jaw for his trouble. Cursing wildly, he dropped to his knees and pawed for the Frontier model that draped his waist. Dude tensed, his hand poised trembling for the draw. But as Stubbs' weapon cleared leather, a voice cracked out over the bedlam of noise.

"Put that gun up, Stubbs!"

Dude spun warily. It was Tony Frisell! He was unchanged except for the graying fringe of hair at his bony temples. His thin, high-bridged nose and glittering blue-black eyes gave him a hawk-like expression. Their eyes met. Dude's were hard and baleful, drilling deep into Frisell's.

Disbelief, then a grimace of fear registered on the gambler's swarthy face.

"You!" he gasped. "I never figgered I'd—"

"You never figgered yuh'd see me this side of hell after yore paid gunwranglers got through with me, did yuh, Frisell?" Dude finished, his voice low and hard as gun steel.

A murmur of excitement ran through the crowded lobby. Frisell's long, thin fingers twitched nervously.

"What—what're yuh aimin' to do?" he breathed, unable to take his eyes from Dude's hard young face.

"Maybe yuh'd like to draw?"

"No!" Frisell choked, his voice rising hysterically. "That'd be murder. No one could beat your gun time, Dude Lane!"

Dude's lips parted in an icy smile.

"I didn't think yuh'd fight, Frisell, so I'm givin' yuh a chance yuh never gave me."

HIS fingers flicked to his vest pocket. Frisell cringed, expecting to see a gun appear in Dude's hand. But instead it was a deck of worn cards! His eyes widened in surprise at first, then narrowed suddenly as he divined Dude's intention.

"You're invitin' me to sit in on a

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game with you?"

Dude nodded. "The stakes'll be Ormsby's ranch, and the cash value of the ranch yuh stole from me five years ago. I'll put up all the gold I'm carryin', which is plenty! And the first time your hands leave the table—my friend here will do the arguin'!"

Significantly, he patted the silver-mounted gun that swung from his carved shell-belt. Frisell laughed derisively.

"I won't need no hardware to beat yore gamblin' time, Lane. Seems like yuh don't know when yuh've had enough. But money talks, now. Come on and stack your eagles!"

A chuckle of excited amusement went up from the hard-faced lobby loafers as the two shouldered their way toward the back room. Dude's heart was beating a fierce tattoo in his breast. He realized instantly that even should he succeed in winning back his own lost property and Ormsby's, he would never get out of the hotel alive if anything went wrong with his plan!

Laakso and Stubbs stepped in after them as they entered the sparsely furnished back room. They took their places at the bare table. Dude sat opposite Frisell, with his back to a wall where he could watch both the window and door. His fingers flashed with expert speed born of long practice as he shuffled the worn cards.

Frisell's glittering eyes followed his every move as he dealt. Then, as the cards slithered across the table, a look of astonishment crossed his face. Dude chuckled dryly.

"These are the same cards yuh used to cheat me out of my ranch. I've carried 'em for five years. I took 'em the night yuh cleaned me, figgerin' on tryin' to make a case against yuh, but yuh had that young fool of a sheriff so scared he wouldn't do anythin'."

"Those cards were on the level!" Frisell stormed.

"Then so are these, Frisell, because they're the same cards."

Frisell laughed nervously as he picked up his hand. "Yuh can't prove that. Let's play!"

Dude nodded, and his lips formed a hard smile.

"Before we begin, let me warn yuh, Frisell. If yuh play yore chips in a way that shows yuh know what I'm holdin' in my hand, I'll know these pasteboards are marked. That'll be all the proof I'll need for killin' yuh where yuh sit!"

The color drained from Frisell's swarthy face, but he played his hand. His eyes kept straying toward the door, and Dude watched him narrowly. Stubbs and Laakso sat in sullen silence, scarcely bothering to look at their cards. They left the strange battle completely to Lane and Frisell.

AS they played, Dude Lane was remembering the past five years of his life. He knew them for what they were, now—horrible, fruitless years! His expensive outfit, bought with hard-earned money, had merely been bait to lure Frisell into a game when they met again. He had drifted from one frowsy gambling hall to another, thinking of nothing but the time when he would again meet Tony Frisell, and all the while polishing his skill with the colored pasteboards that had been his downfall.

It had been a bitter price to pay for one carefree night of pleasure in Frisell's gambling palace back at Neveroo! Frisell had badgered him into a game. Then, while his head was reeling from the effects of unaccustomed liquor, Frisell had cheated him out of everything he owned. A stab of nostalgic pain shot through his breast as he remembered the neat, prosperous little cow outfit he had turned over to Frisell that night. Yet, in place of the fierce satisfaction he should have been feeling, now that he had caught up with Frisell, there was only a dull, empty ache inside him.

Then, suddenly, he realized that he was losing heavily! He hadn't won a hand since the game started. It was true that the cards were marked. He could read the backs as well as Frisell could, so it was "even Ste-

phen," and purely a matter of luck. Or was it luck? The stack of yellow gold pieces in front of him was rapidly diminishing, and he was gambling with money it had taken him five years to earn, riding for second rate, low-paying, shoe-string outfits.

It was Frisell's turn to deal. Dude watched the eye-defeating swiftness of his fingers as he cut and shuffled the cards. The pasteboards spun from his fingers and slithered across the table with an almost machine-like smoothness. Dude admitted to himself that Frisell's dealing seemed to be on the level. Yet just before he began to deal there had been a suspicious, split-second pause in the rhythm of his movements. But when he picked up his cards, Dude quickly decided that the deal had been square. He held aces—three of them!

Automatically he lifted his eyes to read the backs of Frisell's cards.

A shock of surprise surged through him. With the amazing dexterity he was famous for, Frisell had switched decks! They were playing with shiny, new cards, apparently unmarked. Frisell grinned crookedly as he saw that his trick was spotted.

"It's your play, Lane," he said significantly, "What are yuh puttin up on them hold-out aces of yours?"

Cold fury swept through Dude as he realized the extent of Frisell's trickery. A swift glance at his cards told him that they were of the old marked pack. Frisell had framed him so that it would look as though he had slipped the three aces into the pack! He sensed instantly that a gun showdown would be the gambler's next move.

"I'm callin', yuh cheap tin-horn!" he blazed.

HIS hand dived down, but even as his fingers closed over his gun-handle, a voice cracked out from overhead. He raised astonished eyes. Two leveled guns jutted downward from a trap door in the ceiling! Frisell laughed softly. With unhurried move-

[*Turn page*]

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ments, he unsheathed his own gun and aimed it across the table.

"Yuh called, and my hand beats yours! When the sheriff finds yuh dead with a fistful of crooked cards, I don't reckon there's a jury in the world that'd convict me. Every honest citizen hates a card cheat!"

Laakso and Stubbs moved hurriedly away from the table. Dude cursed himself inwardly for overlooking the ceiling trap door. He was through unless he could play for time—he knew that beyond a doubt. But Frisell's hawk-like face already was hardening for the kill. Dude vowed that if he had to die, he would at least take the light-fingered gambler with him before he breathed his last.

"I know when I'm licked, Frisell," he said grimly, "But before yuh kill me, there's one thing I'd like to ask of yuh. Give young Ormsby his ranch back."

His request seemed to surprise the swarthy gambler. Frisell's finger relaxed its pressure on the trigger as he answered.

"Why? He gambled it and lost, the same as you did."

"He didn't gamble, Frisell. Yuh cheated him the same as yuh cheated me with your crooked cards. When he squawked, yuh had Stubbs and Laakso beat him up. Yuh don't have to keep your fancy front with me any longer. In five more minutes I'll be dead."

Frisell bared his teeth in a gloating smile.

"I don't savvy why yuh're so concerned about the young fool, but if it'll make yuh die easier, I'll promise to grubstake him. As for usin' marked cards, there's no harm in admittin' it to you. Only fools gamble, Lane. Smart galoots like me don't take chances with Lady Luck."

"Ormsby'll be much obliged for the grubstake," Dude said, smiling. "But ain't yuh takin' a fool's gamble in lettin' me be found dead here? Suppose the sheriff doesn't believe your story about catchin' me with a fistful of holdouts?"

"Yuh been goin' off at the mouth plenty long," Frisell growled, "But yuh ain't goin' to chin-dig yore way outta here alive!"

His gun-muzzle jerked up, covering Dude's shirt front. It was Laakso who stayed the execution.

"Wait, boss," he whined, his voice rising nervously. "There's somethin' in what this fancy hombre says. Why don't we just take him out and salivate him like we done to all those others. One more corpse floatin' in the creek ain't goin' to make no difference."

"Not so loud, you fool! Somebody might hear you!" Frisell blazed.

"Somebody has," Dude said, chuckling softly, "The sheriff's been standin' outside that window listenin' to every word you said!"

FRISELL jerked around as though he had been shot, his eyes bulging toward the shuttered window. Dude bounded to his feet, heaving the heavy table over on top of Frisell. His hand flashed down, and almost instantly his gun began to stutter a song of blazing death. At the echo of his first shot, Frisell's gunnie dropped like a sack of meal from the trap door.

Stubbs and Laakso were firing, now. Their slugs splattered into the wall at Dude's back, and he bent his knees in a half crouch as he answered their fire. Laakso choked on the blood that gushed from between his lips, and sank to the floor. Stubbs began to mutter insanely until one of Dude's slugs tunneled through his head.

At that moment the window crashed in, sending a shower of glass through the room. Two figures piled over the sill. Dude had time to notice that one of them wore a star on his vest. Then Frisell's gun blasted over the top of the overturned table. Once, twice! Dude felt suddenly sick. He sat down heavily with his back against the wall. The glittering silver of his gun seemed to be filling the room. He struggled to one knee. Through the sparkling haze he saw Frisell's face twisted in a grimace of triumph.

[*Turn page*]

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Dude was almost surprised when a long needle of orange flame darted from his gun and blotted out the face. Then he heard someone pounding on the door. The silver mist dissolved into a swirling black void as he tried to rise, and he was no longer Dude Lane.

A MUTTER of voices filtered through to Dude Lane's slowly returning senses. The sound was dim at first, then it grew steadily louder. He opened his eyes. The glint of light on metal filled his vision and as his gaze focused, a sheriff's star took shape out of the mist. Above the star was a rugged, wide-mouthed face looking down at him.

"Hello," the sheriff said, grinning, "I been waitin' for to shake yore hand, providin' that busted rib of yours will allow it."

"What the devil took yuh so long to bust through that window?" Dude demanded, his voice husky with weakness.

"I didn't believe young Ormsby, here, when he told me what yuh was goin' to do. He argued my fool head off until I finally went with him just to shut him up. I got there just in time to hear Frisell tip his hand about them murders. Him an' his bunch are wiped out. Them that ain't dead high-tailed it for other parts, thanks to you makin' Frisell talk the way you did."

Dude Lane turned his face to the wall. A sense of rightness stole over him, and for the first time in five years he felt at peace with the world. But another voice drew his attention. It was Ed Ormsby's. Dude looked up into his glowing face.

"I got my ranch back," he said gruffly. "And I'm askin' for yuh to be my pardner. How about it?"

Slowly Dude Lane shook his head.

"Thanks for the offer, but I got a ranch of my own down in Neveroo. I'll be ridin' there to earn it back soon's my underpinnin's in workin' order again."

Read MASKED RIDER WESTERN
Every Issue

TRAIL TALK

(Continued from page 100)

The cowboy's speech, however, was too long. He had hardly gotten started when Hickok, who was either not in a killing mood, or knew that the cowboy had come up the trail with a herd that belonged to a friend of his, simply knocked the cowboy loose from his gun, gave him a few head bruises to howl about, and threw him in jail to sober up.

Scouting Days

Hickok was born in LaSalle County, Illinois, and grew to young manhood there. After coming West and after the battle of the Rock Creek stage station that earned him the nickname of Wild Bill, he joined the Fifth Cavalry as a scout and was stationed at Fort Wallace, Kansas, for a short time. Buffalo Bill was chief of the scouts at the time. In the fall of 1869 the fifth cavalry was transferred to Fort Lyon, Colorado, and remained there that winter. When the fifth cavalry was relieved from the Department of the Missouri, all the scouts were discharged with the exception of Buffalo Bill.

After leaving the scout service Hickok went to Fort Hayes, Kansas, and soon after was appointed marshal of that city. It was a tough country in those days, with trail herds coming north from Texas, with outlaws and cattle rustlers plying their nefarious trades, with each man seemingly distrusting all whom he met until he knew whether they were brave honest men, or just bullying bad men. The life of a city marshal was anything but secure.

There were men in those days who would simply not submit to arrest. To have one man, whose guns were no bigger than their own, disarm them and take away their liberty of going where they pleased, was against their sense of right, against their code. They would die before submitting to arrest no matter what the reason was for the arrest, or the charge against them.

There were other men who looked upon any representative of the law as a natural enemy, in the same class as the rattlesnake, to be destroyed before they could strike. These kind of men were numerous among those whom the city marshals and other lawmen had to deal with, and men like Wild Bill Hickok, who by sheer courage and fast shooting, could bring any semblance of law and order into the frontier towns, were much in demand. As Abilene was one of the greatest trail drivers and cattle shipping towns, Hickok became its marshal.

This was in 1872 when Abilene was at its best. More than a half million head of cattle had come up the trail the year before and both business and gun-play were brisk.

A Man's Job

As a stage driver and station attendant, Indian fighter, and peace officer, Wild Bill Hickok did a man's work in cleaning up the

[*Turn page*]

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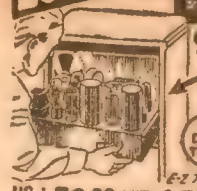

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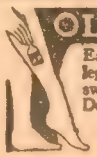

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border. He had gone to Deadwood, South Dakota, with the first gold excitement of the Black Hills, and was about to leave there to join the Custer Expedition as a scout when he was assassinated.

Hickok was assassinated by a cheap gambler, Jack McCall, who thought the murder of such a great gunman would give him reknown. McCall entered the back door of a saloon where Wild Bill was playing poker and shot him from behind. He was shot in the back of the head and died while drawing his two guns. The whole West mourned his passing. It had never known a braver spirit.

Wild Bill was buried on the side of a hill known as Ingleside in Deadwood, and his old pal Charley Nutter (Colorado Charlie) placed a slab upon his grave upon which he wrote: "'Wild Bill' J. B. Hickok, killed by the assassin Jack McCall, Deadwood City, Black Hills, August Second, 1876." And thus ended the career of one of the really brave men of the early West, one who contributed many times to the West's boot hills.

Well *Adios* waddies, be sure and come around again next issue for our next trail ride!

—FOG HORN CLANCY.

OUR NEXT ISSUE

WELL, hombres and hombresses, how did you enjoy this issue? Fog Horn sure gave us an interesting bit of palaver—and did you notice the swell variety of stories in this number? Write and tell me how you like it. Address The Editor, MASKED RIDER WESTERN, 10 East 40th Street, New York, N. Y. I want your opinions and suggestions—and remember, a postcard will do as well as a sealed letter.

Next issue we will again bring you a well-rounded-out number packed with a full-length novel, a novelet, and several outstanding short stories. Every one a winner! The novel itself will be one of the best sagas of the Masked Rider's exploits ever presented in this magazine. When you read THE FIGHTING TEXANS by Walker A. Tompkins you'll find it swift-moving, glamorous and exciting from start to finish.

It's a stirring epic of the Rio Grande—and of the evil deeds of Don Luis Gasparo's guerrilla band of Mexicans, a band that seeks to establish a sinister outpost of rebellion on United States property. How the Masked Rider and Blue Hawk battle to foil this nefarious plan is told in THE FIGHTING TEXANS! Breath-takingly entertaining from start to finish, Walker A. Tompkins' novel is sure to please you.

Another headliner next issue is PEACEABLE MAN, by Thomas Lamar, the story of Christopher McLean, who takes a no-gun vow just before his guns are desperately needed in a good cause. What happens then will thrill you mightily! And in addition, there will be other quick-trigger yarns and a chat with Fog Horn.

So be around, everybody, for an all-star number! See you then.

—THE EDITOR.

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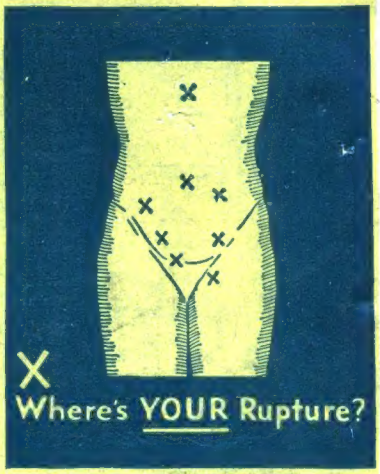

• Why put up with days . . . months . . . YEARS of discomfort, worry and fear? Learn now about this perfected invention for all forms of reducible rupture. Surely you keenly desire—you eagerly CRAVE to enjoy life's normal activities and pleasures once again. To work . . . to play . . . to live . . . to love . . . with the haunting Fear of Rupture banished from your thoughts! Literally *thousands* of rupture sufferers *have* entered this *Kingdom of Paradise Regained.* Why not you? Some wise man said, "Nothing is impossible in this world"—and it is true, for where others fail is where we have had our greatest success in many cases! Even doctors—thousands of them—have ordered for themselves and their patients. Unless your case is absolutely hopeless, *do not despair.* The coupon below brings our Free Rupture Book in plain envelope. Send the coupon now.

Patented AIR-CUSHION Support Gives Nature a Chance to CLOSE the OPENING

Think of it! Here's a surprising yet simple-acting invention that permits Nature to close the opening—that holds the rupture securely but gently, day and night, at work and at play! Thousands of grateful letters express heartfelt thanks for results beyond the expectation of the writers. What is this invention—How does it work? Will it help me? Get the complete, fascinating facts on the Brooks Automatic Air Cushion Appliance—send now for *free* Rupture Book.

Cheap—Sanitary—Comfortable

Rich or poor—ANYONE can afford to buy this remarkable, LOW-PRICED rupture invention! But look out for imitations and counterfeits. The Genuine Brooks Air-Cushion Truss is never sold in stores or by agents. Your Brooks is made up, after your order is received, to fit your particular case. You buy direct at the low "maker-to-user" price. The perfected Brooks is sanitary, lightweight, inconspicuous. Has no hard pads to gouge painfully into the flesh, no stiff, punishing springs, no metal girdle to rust or corrode. It brings heavenly comfort and security—while the Automatic Air Cushion continually works, in its own, unique way, *to help Nature get results!* Learn what this patented invention can mean to you—send coupon quick!

PROOF!

Read These Reports on Reducible Rupture Cases.

(In our files at Marshall, Michigan, we have over 33,000 grateful letters which have come to us entirely unsolicited and without any sort of payment.)

Likes Brooks Best

"I bought one of your Rupture Appliances in 1933, wore it day and night for one year and laid it aside last December. The rupture hasn't bothered me since. I used several others without success until I got a Brooks."—J. B. McCarter, Route 2, Box 104, Oregon City, Ore.

"Runs and Plays"

"My son has not worn the Appliance for over a year. He wore one for ten years and I am very grateful now to think he has laid it aside. He is twelve years old, runs and plays hard like all boys and is never bothered about the rupture."—Mrs. M. George, Route 1, Box 103, Cumberland, Md.

C. E. BROOKS, Inventor

SENT ON TRIAL!

No . . . don't order a Brooks now—FIRST get the complete revealing explanation of this world-famous rupture invention. THEN decide whether you want the comfort—the freedom from fear and worry—the security—the same amazing results thousands of men, women and children have reported. They found our invention the answer to their prayers! Why can't you? And you risk nothing as the complete appliance is SENT ON TRIAL. Surely you owe it to yourself to investigate this no-risk trial. Send for the facts now—today—hurry! All correspondence strictly confidential.

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State whether for Man ☐ *Woman* ☐ *or Child* ☐